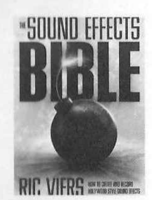
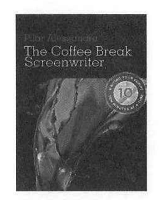
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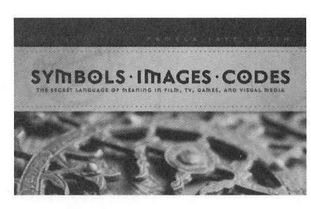
MASTER SHOTS

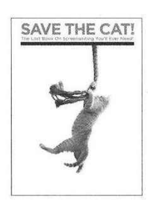


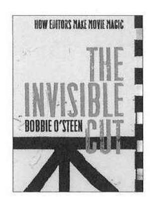
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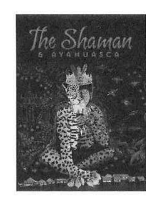




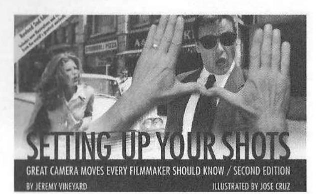




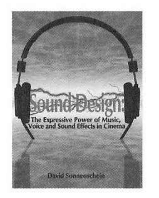


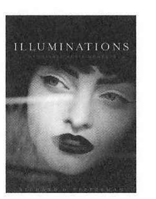


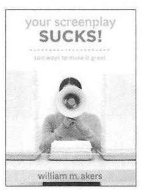


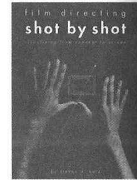


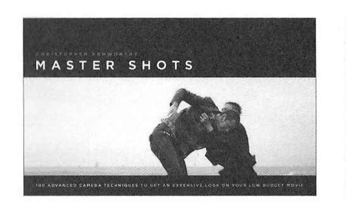


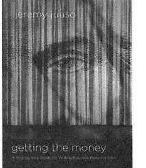


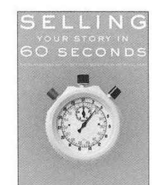


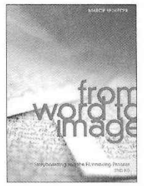


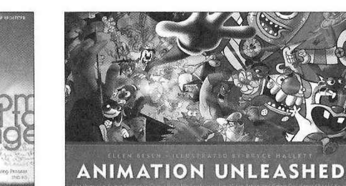


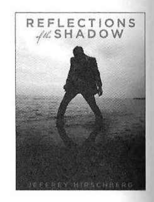


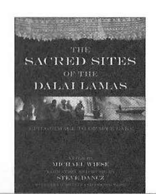


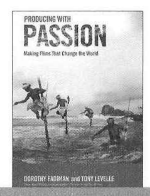


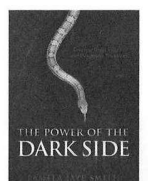




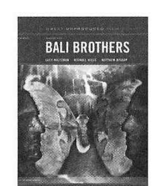


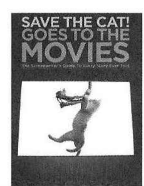




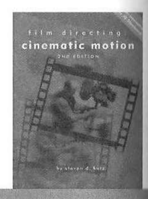












The World's Best-Selling Books for Independent Filmmakers

"The camera is just a tool, and anyone who thinks making a movie is about knowing how to use a camera is destined to fail. In *Master Shots*, Christopher Kenworthy offers an excellent manual for using this tool to create images that arouse emotional impact and draw the viewer into the story. No matter what camera you're using, don't even think about turning it on until you've read this book!"

– Catherine Clinch, publisher, *www.MomsDigitalWorld.com*

"Though one needs to choose any addition to a film book library carefully, what with the current plethora of volumes on cinema, *Master Shots* is an essential addition to any worthwhile collection."

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"Christopher Kenworthy's book gives you a no holds barred, no shot forgotten look at how films are made from the camera point of view. For anyone with a desire to understand how film is constructed – this book is for you."

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"*Master Shots* might seem like a straightforward text on tackling cinematography, but once you start reading, you soon realize it isn't meant just for directors and cinematographers – it's also is a terrific reference source for producers and screenwriters looking for ways to inject energy into their projects and visually enhance their storytelling. Author Christopher Kenworthy lays out his knowledge in a clear-cut, no-nonsense fashion, from how to build more tension into a horror/thriller film to how to capture the steamy chemistry in a love/sex sequence to how to get the most out of a chase scene!"

– Kathie Fong Yoneda, seminar leader, producer, author of *The Script-Selling Game: A Hollywood Insider's Look at Getting Your Script Sold and Produced*

"This book is a crisp telling of shot set-ups for action scenes, fights, and chases, but the amazing thing is the graphics. Not only is the book clearly written, with the shot theories explained but clearly illustrated; it shows you exactly how and why to use various camera angles and lenses to accomplish first-class camera work at any budget level and look like the big-screen, big-budget films we're used to seeing. Really, a must have."

– Richard La Motte, independent filmmaker, author of *Costume Design 101*

"If you're looking for an easy-to-understand guide to putting your vision on film in a powerful way, I don't know of any better book to start with. The way Kenworthy breaks down shots makes it so clear and simple I was inspired to pick up a camera and start filming! And if you're a writer, you *must* read this. Understanding the way shots are actually set up will not only give you a greater visual sense but also increase your ability to write scripts that can actually be filmed! This is a worthy addition to any filmmaker's library."

– Derek Rydall, screenwriter, author of *I Could've Written a Better Movie Than That!* and *There's No Business Like Soul Business*, founder, ScriptwriterCentral.com

"Christopher Kenworthy's *Master Shots* provides an excellent breakdown of the underlying narrative structure of scenes. No matter how exciting car chases or fistfights may be, they are dramatically static until the audience knows the final result. Kenworthy shows us how to make these scenes work."

– Neill D. Hicks, author of *Screenwriting 101: The Essential Craft of Feature Film Writing*, *Writing the Action-Adventure Film: The Moment of Truth* and *Writing the Thriller Film: The Terror Within*

"'Sometimes one punch can tell the whole story....' Such begins the line in Kenworthy's vividly written, descriptive book. A winner."

– Marisa D'Vari, author of *Creating Characters: Let Them Whisper Their Secrets*

"Kenworthy has captured the unwritten and visual language of the moving picture in this essential reference tool. Techies, directors, and writers should read this book to practically and collectively harness this powerful language."

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"*Master Shots* gives every filmmaker out there the blow-by-blow setup required to pull off even the most difficult of setups found from indies to the big Hollywood blockbusters. It's like getting all of the magician's tricks in one book."

– Devin Watson, producer, *The Cursed*

"Good books on film directing are rare, specifically books which focus on staging and framing challenging sequences like action scenes and chase scenes. In this engagingly written book, with helpful illustrations from actual films, Chris Kenworthy goes a long way towards bridging this knowledge gap. Essential for beginners or those looking for a refresher before (or during) their next film."

– Christopher Riley, author of *The Hollywood Standard*

"*Master Shots* is not only a great how-to manual for budding directors, it's a terrific book for anyone who must communicate with directors or understand their language. Whether you're a director, writer, actor, designer, or producer, *Master Shots* helps you think about storytelling from the camera's perspective, making you a better filmmaker and collaborator no matter what your discipline."

– Chad Gervich, TV writer/producer (*Reality Binge*, *Foody Call*) and author of *Small Screen, Big Picture: A Writer's Guide to the TV Business*

"THIS BOOK SHOULD BE BANNED! These are the really cool tricks and techniques of shooting professional directors keep secret just for themselves to use. Why should they be given away for a few dollars?"

– John Badham, director (*Saturday Night Fever*, *WarGames*) and author of *I'll Be in My Trailer*

CHRISTOPHER KENWORTHY

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To Tabitha and Harriet

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This book will give you the inspiration to execute complex and original shots, whatever your budget. The examples shown are generally from feature films with big budgets and all the crew and equipment you can imagine. And yet every single shot in this book can be achieved on the cheap, with a handheld camera. That's why I don't waste any time suggesting what sort of dolly or crane you should use, because you may end up improvising. Many of the greats have done so before.

I've just spent the past few days on location with my Cinematographer, planning shots for my first feature film. I know that the plans we make are only rough, but that gives us more chance to be creative on the day of the shoot. This book can help you to start planning your own shots, so that when you are on set with just a few moments to come up with a great idea, you'll know what to do.

I've been working in film and TV for nearly a decade now, but to my surprise, I've found this book an enormous help in planning shots for my first feature. I doubt there will be a single shot from this book that appears in the finished film exactly as it's presented here, but that isn't the point. These observations and ideas give me a starting point. I can see how it's been done before, how it could be done again, and I can add new ideas as I go.

In TV, and even many films these days, people often move the camera just because they can. Or because people think a moving or wobbling camera is somehow more exciting. But skillful, motivated master shots and well-executed moves can make all the difference between shooting another journeyman scene, and capturing something truly great. Never move the camera for the sake of it, but never sit it on a tripod because you're too lazy to think of something more interesting. If you're stuck for ideas, look through this book, because somebody has almost certainly solved your problem once before. And you can probably improve on their solution.

In almost every chapter I talk about lens choice, and suggest what type of lens you should use for a particular shot. If you're not the sort of director who's interested in lens choice, I encourage you to get a basic grasp. Even if you consider yourself an "actors' director," remember that you can't do the actors' performance justice unless you know the best way to shoot them. It only takes an afternoon with a 35mm Digital SLR, or even just using the zoom on a

DV camera, to see what effect different lenses have. (Although a zoom is a single lens, you can think of it as many different lenses, ranging from short to long.)

Don't leave the lens choice to your Director of Photography. Although your DP can do the job for you, there's no way you can accurately plan your shoots (or come up with them on set) unless you have an understanding of lenses. There are many books that explain the difference between lenses, and what they achieve, but there is no substitute for getting out there with a camera and having a go. If, in any given chapter, I suggest that a long lens works better, try it, and then try it with a short lens and see whether you think I was right or not. What you learn from that is more important than anything I could put in words.

This is not a book about lenses, but I know that a random lens choice leads to a random shot and a potentially meaningless scene. This book is about camera moves, and the master shots that make your scene work. For every scene you need to choreograph a dance between your actors and the camera, with the perfect lens choice. And that's before you even think about directing performance. There's a lot to keep in your head, which is why a book like this can help. The more techniques you know, the sooner you will be able to forget them and come up with your own.

The techniques in this book can not make you a good director, but by learning them you will gain great insight into what makes shots work. By the time you've learned everything in this book, you'll be able to make up another hundred of your own.

ABOUT THE IMAGES

Each chapter contains several types of image. The frame grabs (on black background) are from popular movies, to show how successfully the technique has been used before.

The overhead shots (light backgrounds) show how the camera and actors move to achieve this effect. The white arrows show camera movement. The black arrows show actor movement.

The final shot (lower right) in each chapter shows how this technique could be used in a new way. You aren't simply recreating shots from other movies, but using the technique to create something original.

The overhead shots were created using Poser 7, which enables you to animate characters while moving a virtual camera around them. The arrows were added in Photoshop.

To create the simulated shots, Poser 7 models were imported into Vue Infinite, and then buildings, trees and landscapes were generated in the background.

CHAPTER 1

FIGHT SCENES



1.1

LONG LENS STUNT

The most basic approach to shooting a violent punch is one of the most effective. The very first punch thrown in *Fight Club* was shot this way, and it's used again throughout the film, so it can't be bad.

Most actors are willing and able to pull off this stunt, because it doesn't require a great deal of skill, except in terms of timing. It's a performance challenge that most actors relish. The basic technique is nothing more than having one actor punch to the far side of the second actor's head. Although most filmmakers can guess the basic technique, many forget the importance of lens choice. If you shoot this with the wrong lens, it looks ludicrous and the illusion fails.

The secret is to use a long lens. When you shoot with a long lens, distances between objects are artificially foreshortened. In *Fight Club*, you can see that the long lens makes the distant wall look close to the actors, even though it's a good distance away. This foreshortening also applies to the actors. Edward Norton punches to one side of Brad Pitt's head, but it looks as though he makes contact. The illusion is sold so well because Brad reacts at the exact moment of supposed contact.

Set up your camera with a long lens, and then frame the actors as required. The framing used here is only an example, and the technique works well with tight or wide framings.

Position your camera so that when the punch lands, the fist is hidden behind the victim's head. Actors may be tempted to punch quite close to each other, as they are determined to achieve realism, but this isn't required. Assure them that the punch can miss by a good few inches and still look real. Run the scene in slow motion, and check the shot in camera or on a monitor, to ensure that this is the case. The fist can even go in front of the face being punched, so long as the victim throws his head back convincingly.

It's fine to include some camera movement to follow the action, so long as the punch itself is hidden behind the actor's head. You can shoot an entire sequence this way, with careful planning and rehearsal.









1.2

SPEED PUNCH

Sometimes, one punch can tell the whole story. Your hero makes one huge, sweeping punch, and the victim is knocked to the ground. There's no ongoing fistfight, no battle for victory. It's all over in an instant.

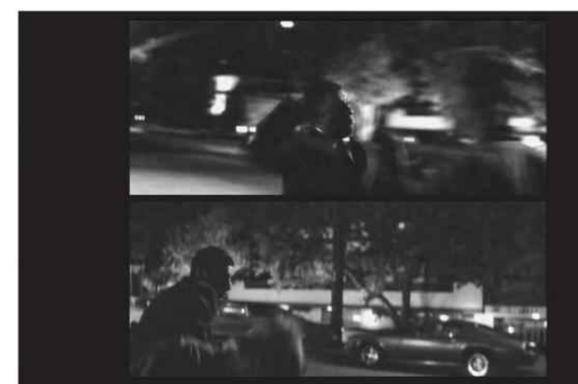
If your story requires this sort of rapid fight, you need to create the impression that this is the most perfect and forceful punch that's ever been thrown. Using a similar technique to that seen in Long Lens Stunt, your hero should punch behind the victim's head. The difference here is that the camera's motion will be directly connected to the actor's momentum, and will echo the feeling of the punch.

Set up your camera alongside the victim, looking towards the hero. If you're using a long lens you may have to get quite close to the actor, to see both characters in shot at the same time. Avoid getting so close that this becomes an over-shoulder shot from behind the victim character, or that the audience can feel like the victim of the attack, rather than cheering the hero on. The hero should be the focus of the shot, so a central framing as he attacks works well.

As your hero approaches the victim – with a run, lunge or determined walk – the camera should move backwards slightly, as though pushed by his movement.

Then, when the punch lands, the camera comes to a standstill, but pans in the direction of the punch. It's as though the punch has also hit the camera and knocked it to the side. This will have the effect of putting your hero, and the victim, to the left of frame. It takes good timing on the part of your camera operator, but when executed well, it can make the safest of stunts looks like an extremely powerful attack.









1.3

MATCHING MOTION

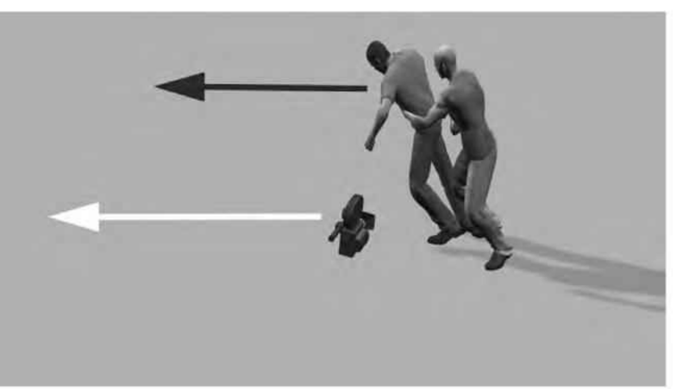
The traditional movie fist fight, where opponents stand opposite each other laying punches to the face, looks a little dated. You still see it, of course, but if the nature of the fight is important to your story, or if you want the audience to really concentrate on who is winning and what's going on, you need to be more inventive. You need to make the audience feel as though they are really there, watching the painful and dangerous action.

One way to do this is to let the camera's motion be dictated by the movement of the actors. So, as the actors move, the camera moves with them. This works best when the actors are brawling and dragging each other around. As such, it may come later on in a fight, when the characters are tired and struggling.

Set up your camera alongside the actors, at about head height. During their struggle, one actor should drag or push the other actor across the room. Your camera should move with the actors as they go. To get the strongest feeling of movement, don't change the camera's height, pan angle or distance from the actors as you move.

When actors move as a pair, their pace will never be completely even. As such, it's easy to fall into the trap of following the two of them as a combined unit, to keep everything in shot. This has the effect of reducing the sense of motion. Instead, focus your camera's attention on one actor, rather than the two as a pair. The difference is subtle, but it is important.

As the actors come to a stop, hitting a wall or falling down, you can then change pan angle, camera height or distance, as this emphasizes that their motion has come to an abrupt end.









1.4

KNOCK DOWN

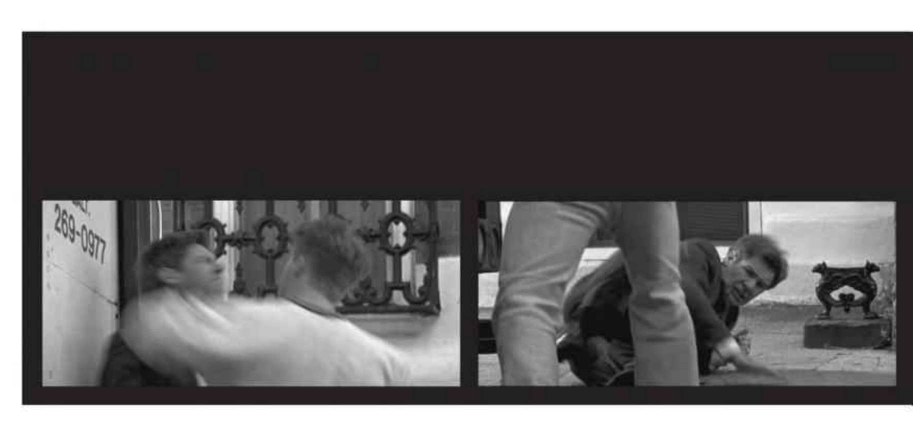
Having your character knocked to the ground is a powerful storytelling moment. It tells the audience that things are not going well for the character, and that the fight is being lost. On-set, though, this can mean putting your actor in danger, or spending money on a stunt person.

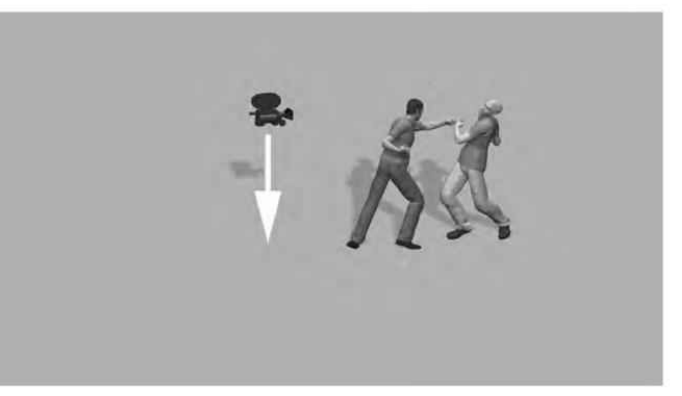
A cheap alternative is to show your actor being punched, then cut to a close-up of the ground as your actor goes down. This tends to feel staged, however, and doesn't have the power of a single shot, taken without cuts.

The solution is to combine the Long Lens Stunt with a simple camera move, which hides your actor's gentle movement to the ground. Rather than having your actor fall dangerously to the ground, you can disguise a gentle sit-down on to the floor and make it look like a dramatic moment.

These stills from *Patriot Games* illustrate the point. Harrison Ford fakes being punched, while the camera remains at head-level. He then gently sits back onto the ground. Once he's dropped out of sight, the camera moves down to the ground, where Ford acts as though he's just hit the ground hard. It's extremely simple misdirection, but with the right timing and use of sound it looks completely convincing.

Set your camera up at eye-level, behind the attacker. As the punch is faked, the victim fakes being punched and lowers gently to the ground and lies down. At the same time, the camera drops down to the victim's eye level, with the attacker shielding the victim's movement from view. It helps if the attacker continues to make aggressive movements towards the victim during this camera move, so the audience has something to watch other than the camera move itself.


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1.5

CUTTING FOR IMPACT

In real fights, feet are used as much as hands. In films, kicks can be used throughout a fight, but are especially useful when showing the build up to a defeat. One character is on the ground, and the other is kicking. This can even occur after the main fight is over, and the winner is enjoying the victory.

How do you shoot this type of kick, without getting involved in complex stunt work? The best way is to shoot with the edit in mind from the outset, getting coverage that will enable the editor to make the kick look effective. You cut from the shot of the attacker, to the shot of the victim, at the exact moment of impact. By planning for this edit, you can get a better result than trying to show the entire kick-and-reaction in a single shot.

To emphasize that one character has the upper hand, everything should be shot from down low. Point your camera up at the aggressor, who can kick something soft that's out of shot. Don't have your actor kick thin air, as that looks fake. Always put a mattress or some padding in there, to give your actor something to work with. You camera should be quite close to the actor, so that the audience really feels the kicks.

For the second shot, again position your camera low to the ground, some distance back from the victim of the kicks. Use a long lens, which shortens apparent distance between aggressor and victim. On action, the aggressor should simulate the end of a kick, by pulling his foot upward or backward. At the same moment, the victim should recoil, as though the kick has landed. By itself, this will look terribly fake, but with sharp editing and sound, it will convince.

When it comes to editing, let the first shot of the attacker's face run for one or two kicks (to give the audience the idea what's happening), then at the moment of the third impact, cut to the lower shot and see the victim's reaction.







1.6

DOWN ON THE FLOOR

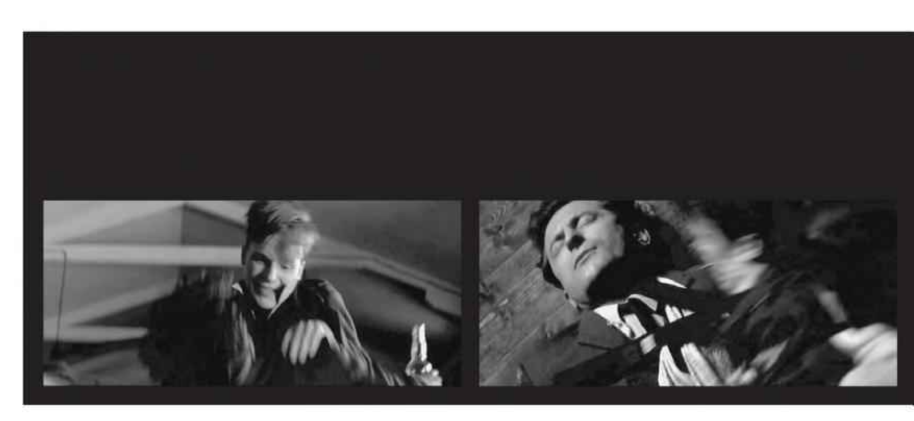
In reality, most fights end up on the floor in moments. In film, it usually takes a while longer, but characters who fight usually end up scrabbling on the floor after the real punching has been done. Partly this is cliché at work, but it also reflects the paradoxical intimacy of a fight. It shows that your characters aren't just thumping each other for the sake of violence, but are involved in a confrontation as personal as a loving embrace.

When your characters end up on the floor, the imbalance of power is more obvious. After all, somebody is on top. The same person may not stay on top for long, of course. Most fights usually end on the floor, because you can see whether one person wins, or whether a truce is reached.

It's simple to shoot towards the ground, over the shoulder of the character who's uppermost, but a little more effort is required to see this uppermost character's face in the reverse shot. Placing the camera on the floor, even without a tripod, will put it too close to the actor's face. You could opt to widen the lens to compensate, but lens choices should be dictated by you, rather than by the constraints of the location.

The solution is to raise the actors onto a platform or table, so the camera can be placed below them. This lets us see the uppermost character's face, and share in the second character's feeling of defeat. In both shots, use the same lens, and keep the camera the same distance from the face that's in shot.

It goes without saying that great care should be taken, and that padding should be placed around the table. Don't have your actors carrying out complex choreography on the raised table; save these close-ups for the point where the fight is coming to an end.







1.7

OFF-SCREEN VIOLENCE

If you want to show a violent attack, but don't want your film to descend into a gore movie, you might not want to see blood and suffering on-screen. Sometimes, your film requires a strong implication of violence, without actually seeing the impacts that are taking place.

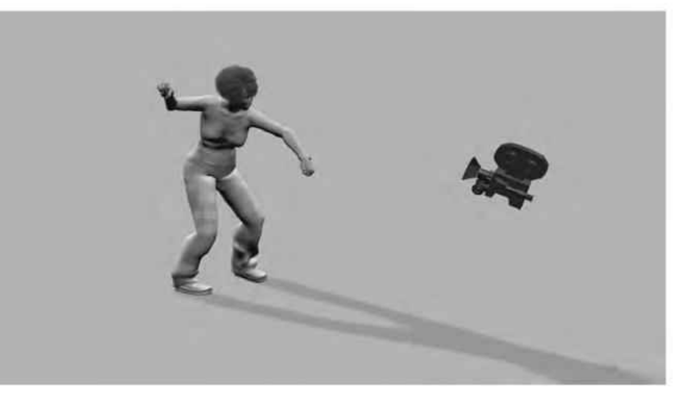
These frames from *Sideways* show one character beating another with a motorcycle helmet. She repeatedly hits him in the face with the helmet, breaking up his face. It's vital for the story that we sense the extreme nature of her anger and violence, but as this is more of a comedy than a thriller, it would be completely wrong to see his face being smashed to pieces. The solution is to show her attack, but not its result.

This technique enables you to create the effect of a violent attack without great risk to your actors. Set up your camera at about waist height, looking up at the attacker, who simulates repeated blows to somebody who is on the ground.

It works best if we see the victim upright in the shot, before the attack begins, so use one of the other techniques in this chapter to introduce the victim and get them on the ground, and then continue with this shot. The actor playing the victim should, of course, roll out of the way and be replaced with some padding, so that the attacker has something to actually hit.

The real strength of this technique is that it requires no cuts, and allows a direct view of the attacker's face. It reveals far more energy and character than a sequence that relies on stunts and cuts.







1.8

THE MOMENT OF DEFEAT

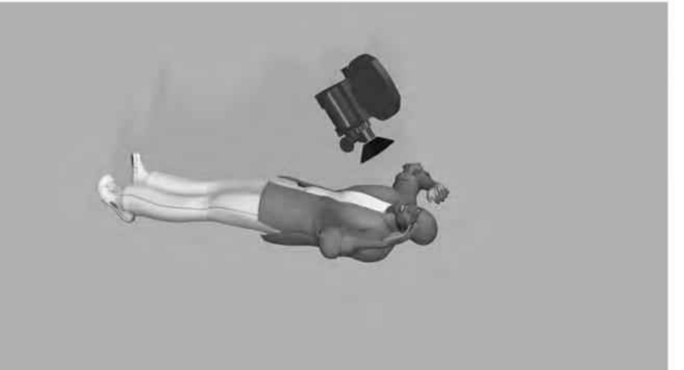
When a fight comes to an end, you want it to be very clear who's won and you also need to see the effect this has on both characters. In film, this usually means that the victor sits atop the loser and either knocks him out or kills him, but before that moment, it's important to relish the moment of victory.

As these stills from *Patriot Games* show, the choice of lighting and lens are completely different for each actor. The victor is shown sitting atop the loser, and we see his expression and read what's going on in his character. The victim, meanwhile, is shot in an almost surreal light, with a long lens, from the point of view of the victor. The contrast in styles shows the contrast in their predicaments.

At the very end, the loser falls back out of sight, leaving Harrison Ford alone in the frame. This is important, because it signals that the fight is over, and allows the audience to refocus on the hero of the story, and watch the emotions play out.

The first set-up, showing both actors, can be the same as Down on the Floor, or you can simply shoot from ground level, with the camera off to one side. The second set-up can be shot with a long lens, high above the actor, or a short lens, with the camera close to the actor. Each will give a different effect, and the choice depends on the requirements of your particular story.






CHAPTER 2

CHASE SCENES



2.1

TRAVEL WITH SUBJECT

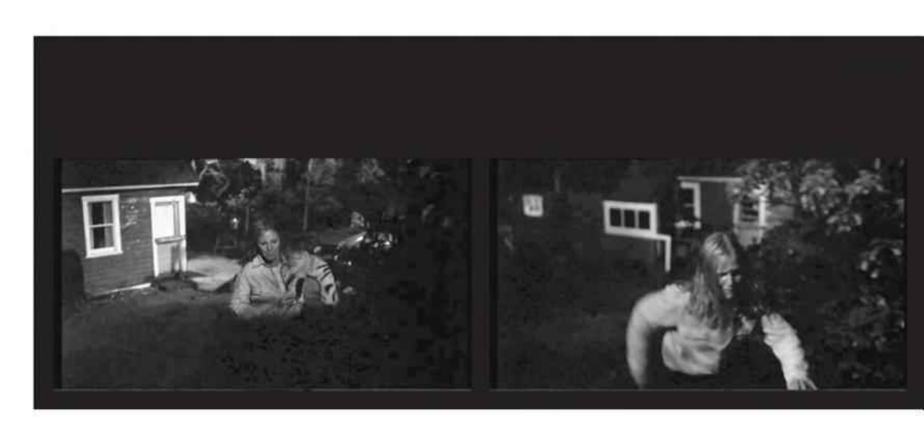
When somebody is being chased, you don't even need to see the person who's chasing them for the scene to work. In fact, seeing nothing other than empty space behind your actor is more terrifying than watching somebody approach.

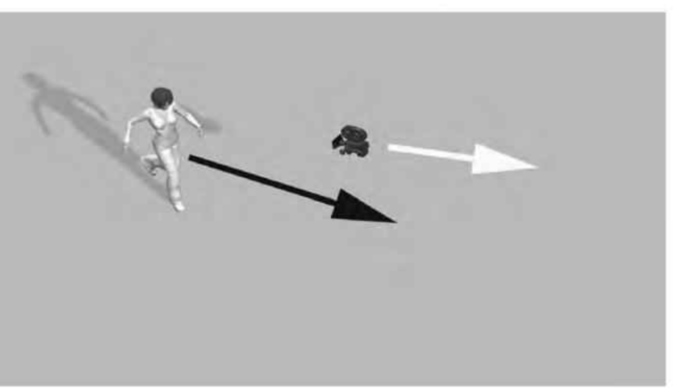
A shot such as this only works once the chase has been established, because we need to know that the character is being pursued. It works best when the actor is struggling through difficult terrain that involves climbing hills and changing direction. If you shoot at night, make sure that enough of the background is lit up sufficiently for the audience to feel this sense of movement.

Set up your camera quite close to the actor, but with a short lens. This accentuates the sense of movement, but exaggerates the background space around your actor. You should keep the camera the same distance from the actor during the shot so the audience feels a strong affinity to her movement.

In these examples, the actor is centrally framed. You don't have to use central framing, but whatever framing you use, keep it exactly the same through the shot. This persistence of framing means the camera is locked onto the actor's movement, so we feel her struggle. The more changes of direction there are during the shot, the better it works. A windy path up a hill is perfect, as it includes the struggle up the hill, as well as many changes of direction.

You need never see the attacker in the background, although this shot can easily be adapted to include the attacker appearing at the very end of the shot. You create far more suspense if the escapee does not see the attacker appear in the background.







2.2

LONG LENS PAN

Most chases involve one person running away, and another following them. You can create a far more original sense of fear, if you have your character run across the screen, while the attacker runs straight towards camera. This won't work in all story situations, but if your main character has a definite goal that must be headed towards, and the attacker can come at them from the side, it's great imagery.

A long lens is used because as you pan with your actors running left to right across the screen, the sense of movement through the environment is greatly enhanced. This works best if there are trees or other obstacles around them and in front of them, flashing across the screen. Equally, the long lens foreshortens the distances, so the attackers appear to be horribly close, even though they are quite distant.

Set up your escaping actors and their path first, then set-up the attackers and camera at equal distances on either side of them. You can track along with the actors, but if you're using a very long lens, there's really no need, and a pan creates just as powerful an effect with a lot less effort.

The effect only works if the attackers can be clearly seen. In this shot from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the scene is very busy, with lots of trees and terrain, so it only works because there are many attackers in the background. If you only have one attacker, the scene should be set in a much quieter environment, so that the attacker is immediately visible.







2.3

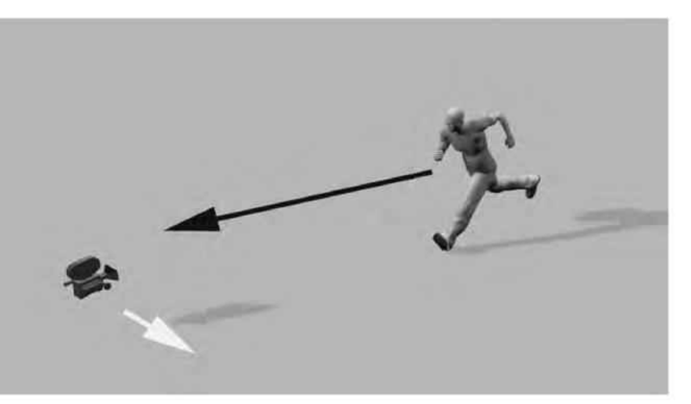
PASSING THROUGH TIGHT SPACES

When somebody is being chased, you can raise the tension by having them pass through a tight space. When space begins to run out, it indicates to the audience that the scene is about to reach a conclusion, and that the pursuers are going to catch up.

To shoot this you'll need a location (or set) that is genuinely narrow. Use a short lens, to exaggerate the character's apparent movement towards you. Although short lenses can make tight spaces look bigger (which *isn't* what you want), a short lens also shows more of a location and exaggerates character motion. In other words, the short lens fills the screen with more wall, and makes the character rush artificially fast towards camera. This combination of effects makes it look as though the character is moving into a tight space.

To get this to work well you need to position your camera in the middle of the alleyway, so that it's in the way of your character's intended path. As your character is just about to hit the camera, track away from this path, and pan to follow him as he looks back over his shoulder. You can keep the camera low, looking up at the character, to really emphasize that he's moved into a tighter, darker space. Let the camera come to rest as the character runs out of the shot.

With a slight variation, this shot can have the exact opposite effect. You can show your character looking back, seeing that the pursuers are no longer following, and then pan as he passes the camera and follow him as he runs off into the distance. This indicates that the chase is over, and that he got away.






2.4

THROUGH OPEN SPACES

During any chase scene, it's wise to give your hero a goal at some point. There should be a house, doorway or car that he is trying to reach. When you get to this moment the audience becomes even more tense, knowing that a great deal is at stake.

If you want the attacker to actually catch up during the scene, that's easy – you just film him catching up. But if you want to film the scene with no change in distance between the two characters as they head towards the goal, how do you make it scary? The danger is that it will just look like they are both plodding along with no real sense of urgency. The secret is to shoot this with two cameras moving across the set at different speeds. You can create an optical illusion that makes it feel as though the hero is going to lose, without actually having the attacker catch up.

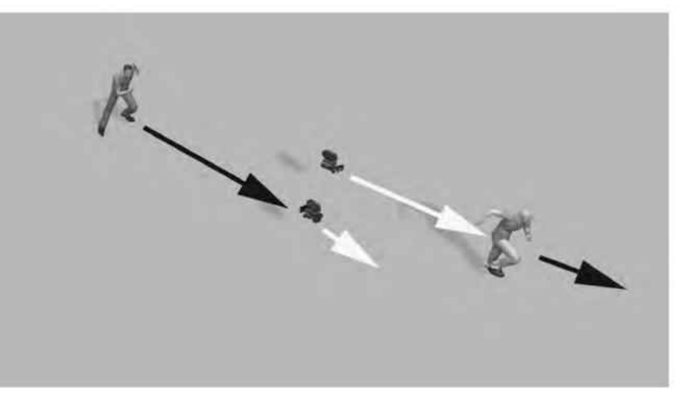
To the audience, it simply looks as though the hero is trying to get away, and the attacker is in hot pursuit. It doesn't look as though the attacker is actually catching up, but it *feels* as though he is catching up. This is a very subtle difference, but one that can make all the difference to your story.

The frames from *Hide and Seek* show how a potentially dull chase can be made terrifying. As Robert De Niro runs towards his house, the camera following him catches up quickly. This creates the sensation that he's being caught.

The camera that faces the attacker moves backwards slowly, while the attacker runs towards it at great speed. This creates the feeling of being caught. It's vital that this camera moves backwards, so the audience feels as though they are about to be caught.

When you shoot the hero, a longer lens can enhance the nightmare effect; it makes the goal look closer, but the goal doesn't get much closer no matter how fast he runs. A shorter lens on the second camera makes the attacker's speed seem almost superhuman as he approaches.







2.5

SURPRISES ALONG THE WAY

Chase scenes work well when you allow for a few moments of suspense, rather than making every moment a breathless chase. You can create suspense either by seeing something in the background that the character can't see, or by having the character see something before we do. Here, we're showing how to create a moment of suspense for the audience, which leads to fear.

The frames, from *Behind Enemy Lines*, show the hero having stopped along the way, assuming he's got far enough away from the enemy that's pursuing him. If the camera was at his head height, we would see the enemy walking behind him, and this would create one kind of suspense. But for more of a shock factor, to jolt the audience out of this moment of calm, the camera is kept low. Then, when the hero hears something, he turns away from the camera. For a few moments we have no idea what he's looking at. Then we cut to a long-lens shot of the enemy walking through the woods.

To create this effect you need to set-up the camera below head height looking up at the actor. It's ideal if there's some sort of barrier for him to be leaning against, as this creates a plausible shield between him and the enemy, making it plausible for him to be unseen.

At the moment the actor hears the enemy, have him look around. Take a moment to watch his reaction, before cutting to the shot of his point of view. It's this moment of anticipation that makes the audience feel a sense of fear. Keep the enemy unseen, for just a moment, and when they are seen it's much more tense, and we know the chase is on again.







2.6

THE UNSEEN ATTACKER

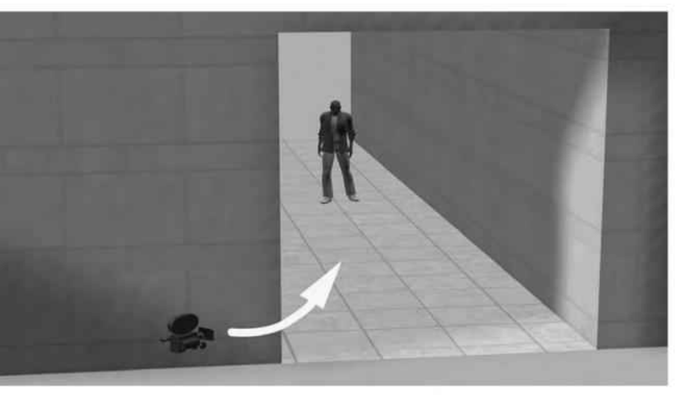
It's often said that the unseen is far more frightening than what is seen. To take advantage of this, however, you need to make it clear to the audience that something or somebody is actually there, chasing the victim. An effective way to do this is with sound. In this example from *An American Werewolf in London*, the victim is walking alone in the underground station, when he hears wolf noises. The first few shots show him listening and peering around, with nothing being seen. Only vague sounds are heard.

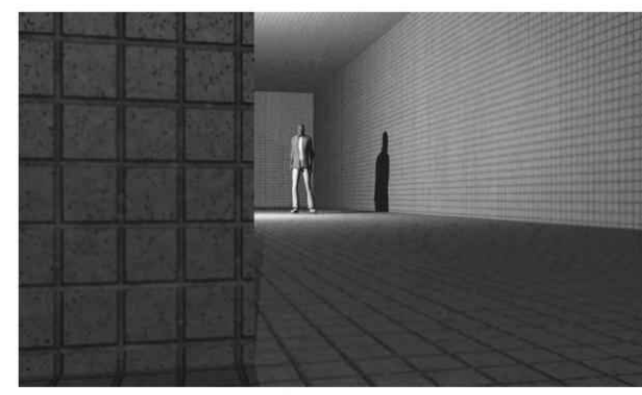
Then, when the werewolf appears, rather than seeing the wolf, we see everything from the wolf's point of view. Best of all, the camera creeps around the corner, with the victim gradually coming into view. This makes it feel like we, the audience, are creeping up on our prey. If the scene began this way, we'd have no sympathy for the victim, but as we've seen him afraid, and looking around for the werewolf, this shot works extremely well.

To use this effect, make sure you show your hero or victim listening, and peering around for the unseen attacker for some time. Then, set-up your camera, low to the ground, and around the corner from the victim. Use a short lens, to make the victim seem a long way away. The short lens also means that as you turn the corner and advance towards him, the camera's movement appears to be much faster than his attempted escape.

You can carry this principle to its extreme, by not showing the werewolf, or attacker, until the very last moment.


A NON-STOP
ORGY
SEE YOU
NEXT
WEDNESDAY





2.7

THE CLOSING ATTACKER

There are many conventions in cinema, and sometimes you can create a powerful effect by breaking them. One convention, during a chase scene, is to follow the escaping victim from the point of view of the attacker, getting closer and closer. A slight adaptation to this shot creates a great moment of shock.

In the frames from *Murder By Numbers*, the hero is trying to escape, and the camera is chasing. The audience expects this to continue, until she reaches a door or trips up, or some other cliché. Instead, the attacker moves into shot and grabs her. What we thought was a Point of View shot, was nothing of the sort – we were running alongside the attacker, and he suddenly made a gain on us. This is guaranteed to make an audience jump, as it breaks expectation.

Set up your camera with a short lens, just behind the character that's escaping, and give chase. It helps if you give your character a goal to be aiming for – a door or corner. This gives the audience something to hope for. They hope your character will make it that far before the camera catches up. During the take, your camera should catch up slightly, but before you get there, have the second actor speed up and move into shot, making a grab for the victim.

This works best if you don't give the audience time to guess what you're about to do, so the whole shot only needs to be a few seconds long. It works best if there is a desperate sense of urgency, with the victim scrambling and falling and trying to keep going through difficult terrain.







2.8

UNFAIR SPEED GAIN

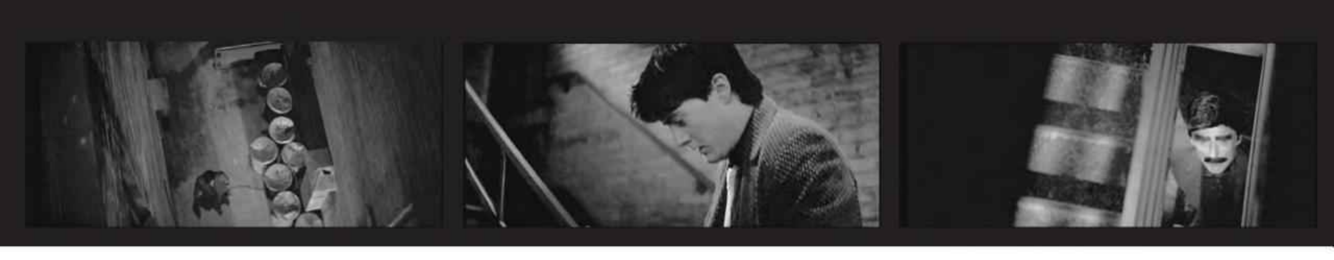
Not all chase scenes are a mad rush, with one character chasing another. Sometimes, your hero is simply trying to hide, hoping the attacker won't find him. When this is the case, you create a jolt of fear in the audience, when the attacker makes a sudden gain on the character.

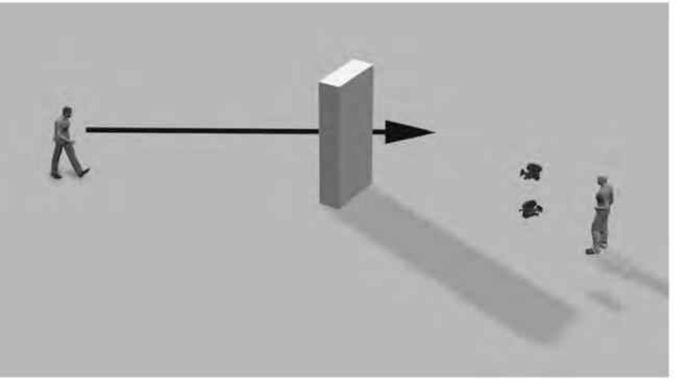
In reality, this could never happen, but with careful shooting and editing, you can make it look as though your hero's slight hesitation has given the attacker the chance to make great progress in his pursuit.

The stills from *Blue Velvet* show how Dennis Hopper approaches the building, walking (but not running) across the street, and moving briefly out of sight. We then see Kyle MacLachlan looking down, pausing as he decides what to do. A moment later, we look down again from Kyle's point of view, and see Dennis much closer than should be possible. It's a frightening moment and one that means the full chase is on, and Kyle's character has to run and hide. It makes an ordinary man seem much more frightening.

To make this effect work, you must have the attacker disappear briefly behind a wall, stairwell or other object, and then cut back to the observing hero. The third shot should be taken with a much longer lens. This not only increases the apparent gain the attacker has made, but also works to make the effect more plausible.

In the *Blue Velvet* example, Kyle is looking down, but you can easily shoot on the level or looking up, so long as the attacker disappears briefly. Although you can have the attacker running, there is something far more sinister about somebody who's walking making a sudden gain.







2.9

ALMOST THERE

The sensation of almost getting away, but suddenly being trapped, is frightening. In film this works best when there's a lot at stake. Use this technique when getting caught would mean instant death or the failure of a quest.

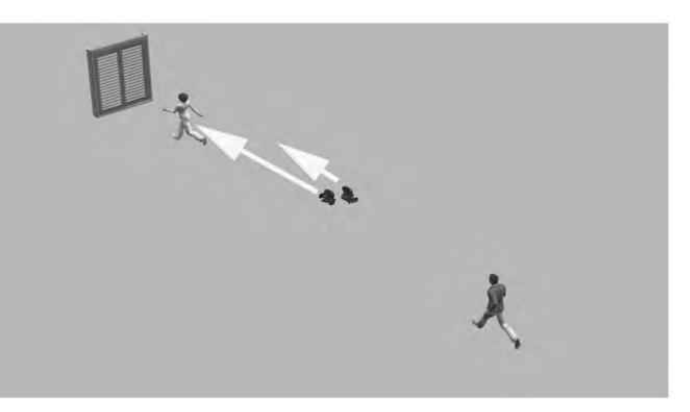
The frames from *Children of Men* show how three characters are running down a corridor, to get away from a man they've just beaten to the ground. As they run towards a jammed door, and struggle to get out, the camera chases up to them and catches up.

This is crosscut with a camera watching the fallen attacker get up. This camera moves slowly backwards. The combination of two cameras moving towards the characters at the jammed door creates a great sense of urgency. In this example, the attacker isn't even coming towards them, but it merely getting up. The effect can be even stronger when the attacker is in actual pursuit.

When you set-up this shot, give your characters an obstacle that is potentially impossible to pass, such as a locked or jammed door. That gives the first camera time to rush up to them. The other camera, which moves slowly backwards, does not need to show the attacker in great clarity. The attacker can be on the ground, or distant, and the effect is still extremely powerful.

You can also use a mix of handheld camera and dolly work, which enhances the nightmarish quality of the moment. The camera that chases your characters can be handheld, while the camera tracking away from the attacker can move on a dolly. This mix of panicked camera work, with something slow and steady, makes it feel as though the attacker is getting the upper hand, and will catch them no matter what.







2.10

FOOTWORK

Chase scenes aren't always about an attacker and a victim. Sometimes, you have one character trying to catch up with another for more innocent reasons. For this to work, it's best if the person being pursued has no idea a chase is on.

In this scene from *Amélie*, the male character is in a rush, and Amélie is trying to catch up with him. By putting the camera low down and shooting her feet, we get to see the energy of her pursuit, as well as how close or distant she is from the hero. This is much smoother than if we were watching this from over her shoulder, or from a wide shot.

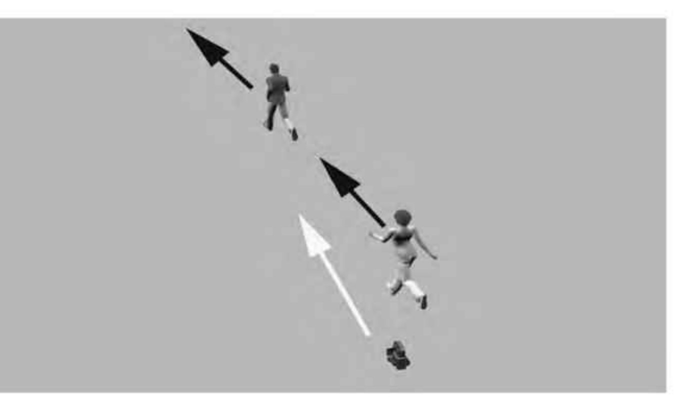
Set up your camera slightly behind the character who's in pursuit. The other character should be slightly offset to the right, rather than directly in front. This makes it easier to get everybody in shot. The character who's in pursuit should run directly ahead, rather than directly towards the character she's pursuing. This enables you to move the camera slightly faster than her, pan on to her legs, and still keep the other character in shot.

The effect of being low-down, with this sort of smooth motion, is that the audience is forced to guess the character's emotion, purely through their movement and distance from each other. It must, therefore, come in the middle of other shots that have established the nature of the chase.

It's easy to pull this off, even with a handheld camera as you run, or with dolly tracks. You can even adapt this shot to include changes of direction, as well as going up or down hills. Don't stay in this shot for too long, though, or the audience may become frustrated.

Although it is used here for whimsical reasons, it can also be used effectively in a more serious shot, where one person is secretly pursuing another.







CHAPTER 3

ENTRANCES & EXITS



3.1

CHARACTER SWITCH

A powerful way to introduce your main character into the film is to show a crowd, and then have your character come to the front of the crowd and become the focus of the shot. This underlines that this character is a hero, and more important or interesting than everybody else in his world.

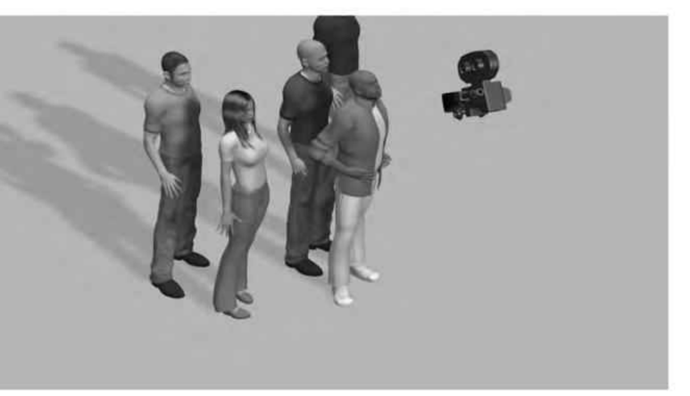
These frames from *Children of Men* show exactly how this works, because when this scene opens, we think we're just watching people observing a television set. We don't expect Clive Owen to push through to the front. When he does, and looms into view, it's clear that he's made an entrance to the film.

There are several ways to make your character strand out at this point. One is to give him more light than the other people in the scene. Another is to make sure that everybody who's on the same plane as him is shorter. The *Children of Men* shots show this well. Everybody else on the front row is relatively short, so he towers above them, making it clear he's the hero of the piece.

Set up your camera to the height of your main character, and angle down towards the crowd. Make sure there are no faces among the extras that are too distinctive or distracting, or extras that are trying to steal the scene by over-acting. The extras should keep quite still, as your hero pushes through the crowd.

This technique also underlines that your hero is an active character, somebody who will do things to the world, rather than have the world just happen to him. While everybody else stands there observing, he moves in and out of the scene. To the audience, this signals that we've met a character who's going to take action throughout the film.







3.2

BACKGROUND REVEAL

Directors like to give characters strong entrances when they first appear in a film, and at key moments of change or drama. Usually, these entrances end with a close-up of the actor in question. You can take the opposite approach, and show the character in the distant background. This works best when the character's appearance in a scene is a surprise, either to the audience or the other characters. It works better for entrances that occur when we already know the characters well.

In this example, from *Punch Drunk Love*, the scene starts with a set-up that appears to be nothing more interesting than two characters bickering during a haircut, but then as we move around them, we see Adam Sandler is watching them. He doesn't actually make an entrance. Instead, the camera gives him an entrance. It's his lack of motion that makes this dramatic.

The effect is lost if you announce the character's arrival with a loud bang, a shout, or some other call to attention. Although a minor sound can be used to attract the other characters' attention, let the visuals do the work. Set up the opening of the shot as though a full scene could be played without a camera move. The entrance of the third character should feel like an intrusion on the scene.

Although you want the entrance to be a surprise, you don't want the camera move to feel forced. Set up your shot so that there's some empty space at the side of the frame. Once the shot's begun, your camera can move towards this empty space, keeping your characters roughly in the middle of the shot.

Although you can get the required result with a simple track and pan, you create a stronger effect by circling slightly around your characters, as you pan towards them. Having the third character in silhouette can emphasize the effect.






3.3

THE TURN IN

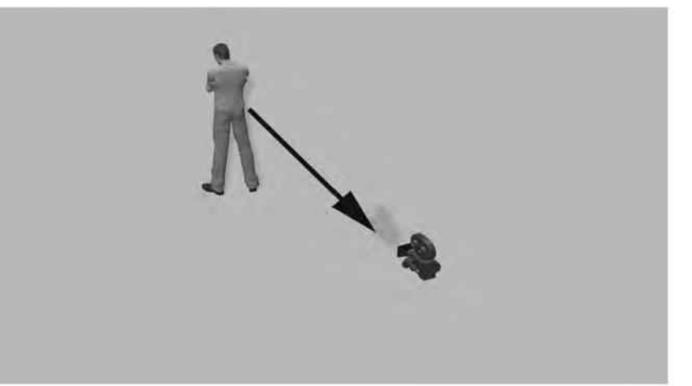
We love to see a character's face, so when a scene opens with a character's face hidden, we can't wait for the actor to turn around, The Turn In is a good way to introduce a character to a scene, when they are about to make an important announcement or change in their life, or start approaching their problems in a different way.

You can even start the scene with a few lines of dialogue, as the actor talks to somebody off-screen, before he ever turns to face the camera. It might help to set-up your camera so that the other actor's shoulder is just visible in shot; otherwise the audience may think your hero is talking to himself.

When Gérard Depardieu turns into the shot, the moment is made far more powerful because he walks straight up to the other character. If he had only turned around, it would look like he was staring out of a window and finally joined a conversation. The Turn In works because he turns in and storms into the scene, taking over and showing his strength and determination.

Don't get your actor to stare at a wall, or something else close-up, because it looks ridiculous. Give your actor a window or balcony to peer out from, so that there's a reasonable justification for him to be staring off into space.

Set up your camera behind the actor, with a long lens. Although you can move the camera to accommodate the actor's movement as he walks towards the other actor, the less movement this shot contains, the better it works. Set up your actors' marks so that the camera barely needs to move.









3.4

OBJECT REVELATION

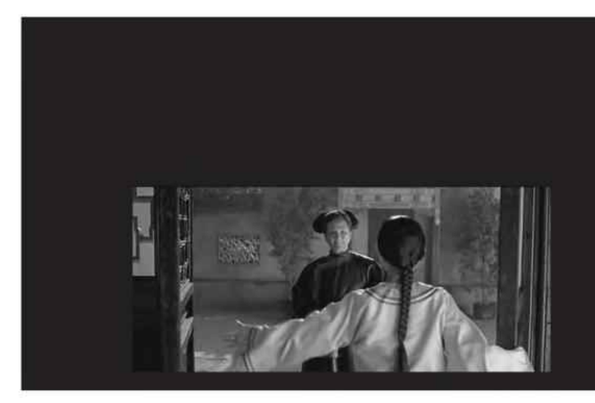
There's something extremely powerful about placing a character dead center of the screen, when they first appear in the film. It's a way of saying, this person is important, so take note. One way to do this is to place the character in the center of the screen, behind an object, and then move that object out of the way.

The simplest solution, as illustrated with these frames from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is to have a door, or doors, opened. An ordinary door, which swings to one side, isn't as powerful as double doors, or sliding doors, which part to reveal the character. You can use other objects, such as cars or boxes that are pushed out of the way, but if doors are available, they work well. Whenever an audience sees a closed door about to be opened, it arouses their curiosity.

You can build this moment into a complex shot, with lots of camera moves, but when the doors are about to open, bring the camera to rest. The longer your lens, the more clearly we'll see the new character. Be wary of using too long a lens, though, or the door frames may not be in view. The door frames help frame the character, and this gives her much more significance than if she's standing in open space.

The character that opens the doors will have to stand to one side, which may feel a little artificial for the actor, but is essential for the new character to be visible.

To add real power to this shot, let everything come to rest for a moment – the doors, actors, cameras – and then have the newly introduced character walk into the room. This underlines her importance.







3.5

WINDOW PUSH

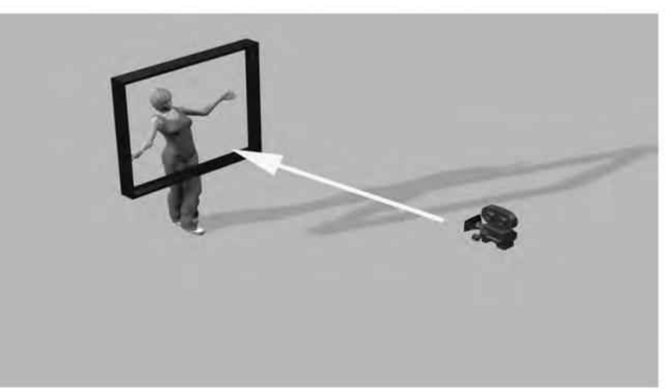
Sometimes you want a character to do more than simply leave the scene. You want to signal that she's leaving behind a part of herself, or a section of the film. At moments of such change, the Window Push is a good way to signal this sense of closure.

In these frames from *Amélie*, a simple combination of effects creates the correct emotion, without it looking like a technique at all. The camera moves towards the windows, as they are closed, and then the character walks out of the shot and turns out the light. It's the combination of these factors that makes this work. When a camera dollies forward, we get the feeling we're going to see something new, so when the character walks out of the dolly shot and leaves a dark window, it creates the surprising feeling of closure. It breaks expectations. Equally, if the window was already closed, or the light already out, the effect would not be as powerful.

Set up your camera outside a window, and dolly smoothly towards your main character, as she closes the windows, backs out of the shot and turns out the light. Make sure there's plenty of light on the outside wall, otherwise the shot simply goes dark, rather than revealing the dark, empty room.

The technique can be varied in many ways, to create other emotions. You could, for instance, follow a character towards a front door, which is slammed behind her, leaving us dollying in on a closed door. Or you could push in on a character sitting in a car, which drives out of the shot.







3.6

SCENE SWAP

Imagine that you want two conversations to take place in the same location, one after the other. How do you get one character to leave the location, and introduce the next character to the scene without awkward pauses or dead screen time?

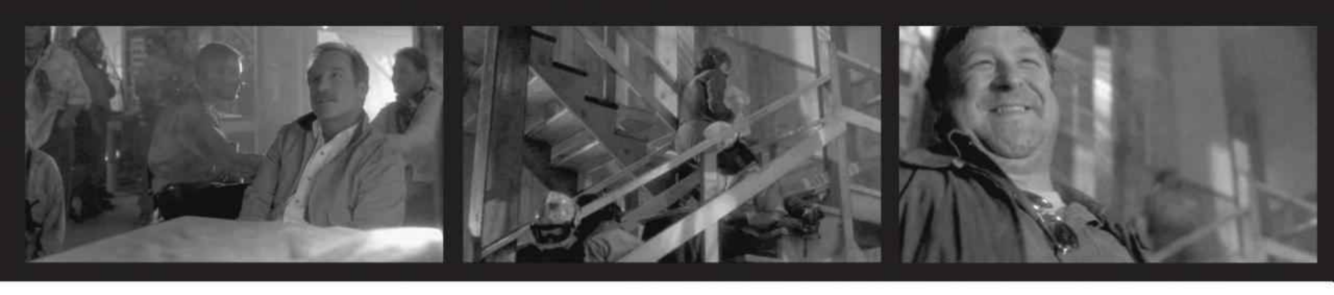
The frames on the left, from the 1989 film *Always* directed by Steven Spielberg, show how you can connect two mini-scenes. First we see Richard Dreyfuss ending his conversation with Holly Hunter. We see him looking at her, and then from his Point of View we watch her go up the stairs. At this point, you're expecting a cut to another shot or to another scene. Instead, John Goodman slides into frame, in medium close-up. After a couple of seconds we cut to a wide shot of John Goodman sitting down with Richard Dreyfuss, and the effect is complete.

By connecting the two mini-scenes visually, in one shot, they flow together. If Spielberg had simply cut from Richard Dreyfuss, to a medium wide of John Goodman walking in, it would have felt like two scenes were being forced together.

For this effect to work, the scene change should almost be seen through the eyes of the character that stays put. Set up your camera as though it's looking through this character's eyes, and follow the actor who moves away in the background.

The third character should be close to camera, stepping into the shot from the side. In most cases, the distance between the background and foreground characters will require a quick focus change at the moment the third character steps into frame. This focus shift enhances the effect.

Camera movement can be used to enhance the effect. In Spielberg's example, the camera follows Holly Hunter up the stairs, and the camera keeps moving upwards to take in Goodman's full height.









THE PENDULUM PAN

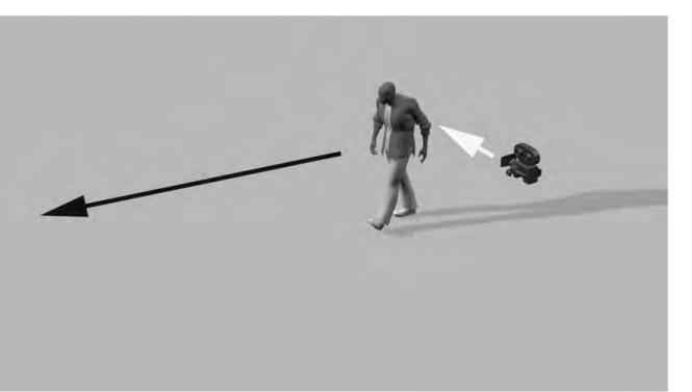
The Pendulum Pan is best used for a final exit, either from a section of the film, or from the whole film. It creates a feeling of closure, as though the character really is leaving, and is an ideal way to see a character leave the film for good.

From the stills shown here, it looks as though the actor walks past, and the camera pans after him. There is, however, a subtle move that makes all the difference to the overall effect. As the actor goes past the camera, the camera moves forward. It moves into the pathway that the actor was following, and continues to pan after him. For reasons best left to psychologists, this creates the feeling of seeing somebody really leave. This is a particularly fascinating effect, because it is so subtle. To see the power of tiny differences in camera moves you can try shooting it both ways; once with a simple pan, and then with the Pendulum Pan. The difference is enormous.

Set up your camera perpendicular to the path that your actor is taking. It works best if the actor walks in a straight line, but it doesn't matter whether this is in a street, open space, or even down a hill. The camera pans as the actor approaches to keep him framed, but is otherwise motionless. Only as the actor steps in front of the camera does it begin to move towards him.

Continue to pan, but stop the forward movement as soon as you're on the actor's line of movement. All these moves should be gentle, although the pan will pick up some pace when the actor passes close to the camera.

An alternative approach is to have the actor further away, and a longer forward camera move, but in some locations and circumstances this can look forced and overly dramatic. Of course, that may be what you want, so this is a good move to experiment with.









DIRECTION SHIFT

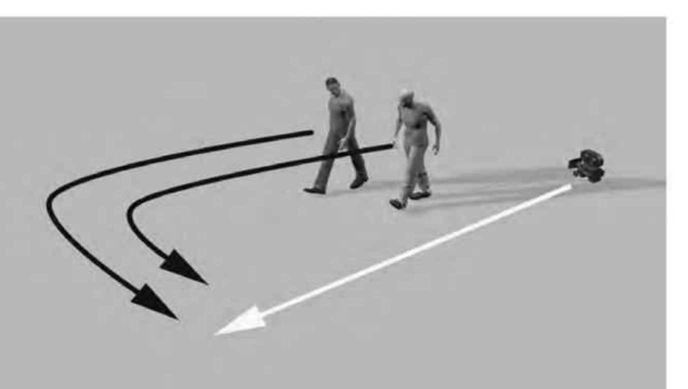
The Direction Shift is a special case, in that it can be used as an Entrance or an Exit. The shot begins with the camera some way back from the character, or characters, as they walk along. The camera tracks with them, keeping them in frame.

Towards the end of the shot they turn and walk towards the camera, as the tracking movement gradually slows down to a halt. To use this technique to introduce a character or characters to a scene, you would have them walk in to this position and begin a conversation, or perform some action, This sort of entry is best used when we already know the characters, and are introducing a new section of the film, or a new scene.

To use the technique as an exit, the characters should continue walking, past the camera. This is not the sort of exit that creates real finality, but more of a sense that the characters are moving on elsewhere, and we'll catch up with them soon.

Set up the end of the shot first, with your characters in their final positions. This enables you to have a set camera height and angle throughout the shot, meaning there is no movement except the tracking. Now set-up the beginning of the shot, and position your actors so they are in frame. You may need to make small angle adjustments while shooting, to keep them accurately framed, but the main sense of motion should come from the tracking move.

Timing of the tracking move can be quite difficult, so practice several times before shooting. The technique works well during dialogue scenes (so long as you have wireless mics), but if there's no dialogue, keep it short.









CHAPTER 4

SUSPENSE, SEARCHING & CREEPING



4.1

SUBTLE DOLLY

The Subtle Dolly, as its name suggests, is a camera move so slight that the audience won't notice the camera moving, but will feel uneasy.

This shot is used when characters are creeping around in a dangerous space, hoping not to be spotted, or shot at. As the actor creeps towards the camera, the camera moves back slightly. For the audience, this feels like we're backing up into dangerous territory. The last thing you want to do is turn your back on the danger, but that's exactly what this technique makes the audience feel. Sometimes, the smallest moves have the largest effects. Without this move, the tension would have to come entirely from the actors' performance.

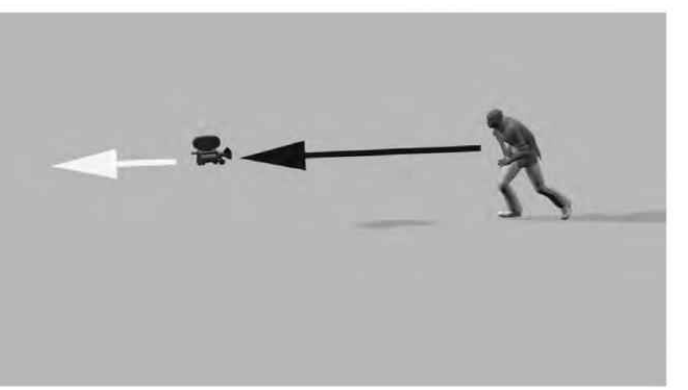
The example shown here has the camera set-up close to a wall, and this also adds to the feeling that we're creeping around. The technique can, however, work in open spaces, because creeping around in an open space is also frightening. The trick is to have your actors moving forwards, glancing around, while the camera backs off slightly.

Set up your camera pointing towards the actor, and have him move towards you. It's fine if he's looking off to the side, or above, but his movement should be directly towards camera, rather than weaving through the scene.

The camera should move back a short distance, and the actor should come to a rest close to the camera. The move doesn't need to end here, of course, because you can have the actor move off, and continue with a longer shot.

If there's more than one character in the scene, try to keep the audience attention on one lead character. Get the other actors to follow a tight line, so they are barely seen behind the lead actor. If the actors spread out too much, it takes away the sense of danger, and the need to hide.







4.2

THE UNSEEN

It's been said so many times that it's a terrible cliché, but things that aren't seen are far more frightening than those that are. What people often forget, however, is that it takes some skill to indicate that there is something out there, something that's frightening.

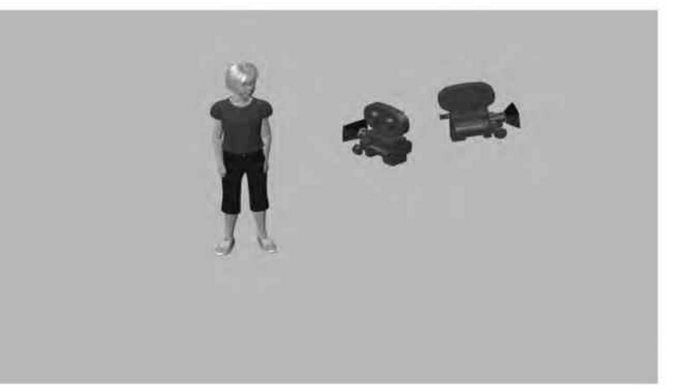
A technique shown here, from Philip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, is an excellent example of how to create fear and tension by showing almost nothing. The characters are escaping from a tracker, and at this point in the film, he's a good distance away. The story could, as a result, become dull, but we want the tension to remain high until the tracker is much closer. Noyce shows this fear by having a close-up of the main character, rather than showing her POV. But the Point of View isn't what we'd expect. She's not looking into the forest, but up at the tree tops. Her POV darts from one tree to another.

For some inexplicable reason, this unexpected, jerky Point of View makes the actor's look into empty space feel like a moment of real dread.

It's unlikely that you'll want to recreate this exact scene, but the essential keys to adapting this for your own film are as follows. You need to get a good close-up of your actor looking afraid, in the context of an ongoing chase. This shot should be quite still. Don't go circling around, or dollying in. Keep this camera still.

The POV should be shot handheld, and at an unexpected angle. If this was taking place in a city, with an on-foot pursuer, it would work to have the character look up at the street signs. It unsettles the audience, they don't quite know what's going on, and fear is created.







4.3

ANTICIPATING MOTION

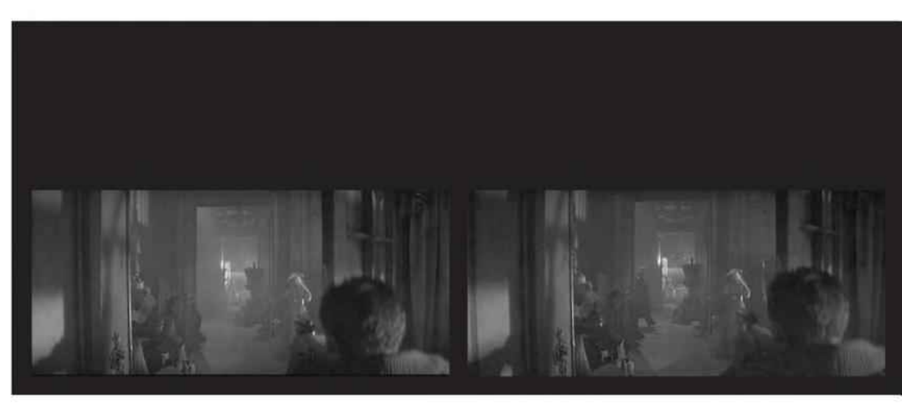
In the middle of a chase scene, there's nothing more likely to raise tension than having everything come to a halt. So long as we know that the attack is about to resume, then coming to rest is far more frightening than actually being chased.

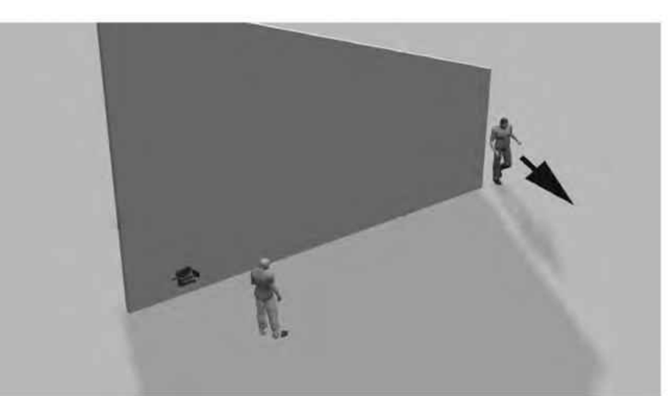
In these stills from *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford's character makes it clear to the audience that he's anticipating something, because he points his gun into empty space, and every shred of acting ability is put into his body movement to convey this expectation. This is enhanced, however, by framing Ford as almost incidental, in the bottom right-hand corner. Our eye is drawn to the bright, empty space in the top left, which makes us know something is going to appear there.

When Rutger Haure steps in, we're completely expecting it, but it's still frightening.

Set up your camera behind your main character. This should be more than an over-shoulder shot, but should put your main character almost out of sight, so we look where he looks. There should be an empty space for us to look into, and also a plausible entry to this space. In other words, just looking down a dead-end corridor won't create any fear. But if there's a door on the left with light coming through it, we know somebody can come through that door.

Anticipating the appearance of the character is how you create the tension, and what you do with it after that is up to you. In this example, Haure disappears in an instant, but you could just as easily have him run at the camera. This is a powerful technique because it can be used in many locations, and followed by any number of actions and shots.







4.4

PUSH ON NOTHING

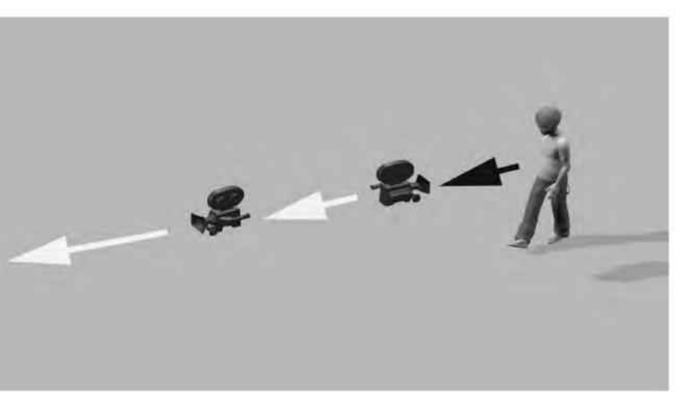
Without any scary music, or anything jumping out, you can create a sense of fear and tension in the audience. You do this by moving a Point of View shot through an empty space.

When you wander around a scary house or frightening street at night, you're scared not by what you can see, but by the expectation that something may appear. You see nothing at all unusual, but as you move forward, new things come into view, and you keep hoping nothing frightening will jump out. This is such a familiar human experience that it can be translated directly into film.

When your character's moving through an unpleasant place, you can create tension by letting the audience see things exactly as they would see them. You move your camera through the empty space.

In film, when you push in (or move towards) something, it can signify a thousand different things, but it nearly always means something has changed. To push through empty space means you echo the human experience of walking through a frightening place, while also using a cinematic signifier of change. This makes the audience worry that something is about to happen or appear. Whether you actually have something frightening appear or not is up to you, but to create this tension, you need nothing more than an empty corridor.

Shoot your character at eye level, moving the camera backwards at the same rate they pace through the corridor. Then turn the camera around, and shoot the same scene as though from their point of view. Although pushing down empty corridors is frightening enough, a move through a door to one side heightens the sense that something unpleasant is about to happen.





4.5

WIDENING THE SPACE

When your character is trying to escape from a heavily guarded area, there are several techniques that help raise tension of the scene. A classic is to keep the camera low, and look up at the character as he creeps around. This works because it feels unusual, and also obscures our view of the surroundings, making them mysterious.

Widening the Space is a technique that begins a shot low down, hiding the environment, but then has the character come down to the level of the camera. You can see in these frames from *Children of Men* that as Clive Owen creeps around, the camera pans with him, but also moves behind him. This means that by the time he's crouched down, we have an over-shoulder shot, looking into a wide open space.

In a few moments we've gone from watching him creep about, which makes us feel uneasy, to seeing what he sees – a huge, open space filled with guards which will be impossible to cross. An empty space could work as well, but here, the guards are a story point, letting us know that a challenge is ahead.

One of the difficulties with any slow escape is keeping the tension high. If handled poorly, the audience just gets bored. To keep tension high you have to keep adding new challenges, new obstacles, rather than just having one person tiptoe around. Widening the space is an excellent way to move from creeping out hopefully, to seeing the next big obstacle.

Set your camera up as low to the ground as possible, and pan with the character. At the same time track across, so that you end up behind the character, looking over his shoulder. The pan and track should be executed to come to rest at the same time as the actor.













4.6

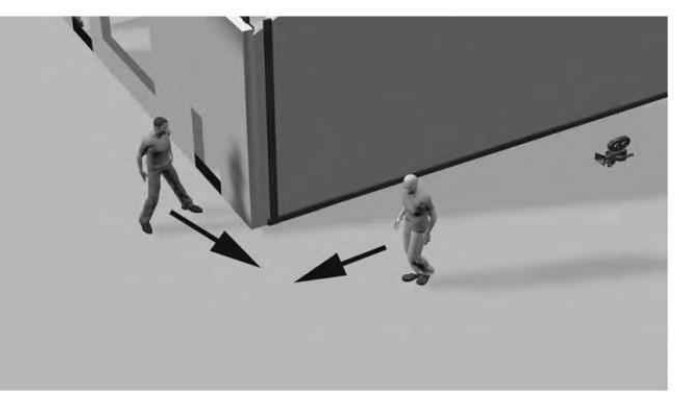
TWO THINGS AT ONCE

A great way to create a moment of shock is to draw the viewer into a false sense of security. Through careful shooting and editing, you can make the audience think that nothing is about to happen, and then have something happen. This tends to make them jump out of their seats.

In this example from *The Shining*, we see two characters in different places. We cut back and forth between them. Scatman Crothers gets closer to the hotel with each shot, and then gradually gets further into the hotel. Meanwhile Jack Nicholson wanders from corridor to corridor, in a different place in each shot. To the audience, it feels as though Scatman is closing in very slowly. This creates an expectation that the search will continue for some time. Then, when we think we're comfortably watching a shot of Scatman wandering down a corridor, Jack steps out from behind a pillar and axes him in the chest.

To build this false sense of security requires good editing, as well as good shooting, because the key is rhythm. You cut back and forth between two sequences, keeping each shot roughly the same length. If you were to speed up the cuts or shorten the shots, the audience would feel a build up to a confrontation. When you keep the shots at similar lengths, nobody expects the two sequences to meet so abruptly. It's obvious that Scatman is getting closer (because he's moved from outside in his car to the innards of the hotel), but you don't guess that he's quite so close to his doom.

Whatever way you choose to shoot this, it's a good idea to keep several parts of the sequence similar-looking. A good solution is to shoot the victim from behind, as though we're following him on his search. Do this in several shots, not just the last one. This way, the audience thinks it's just another shot until the very last moment.





4.7

TRACES AND CLUES

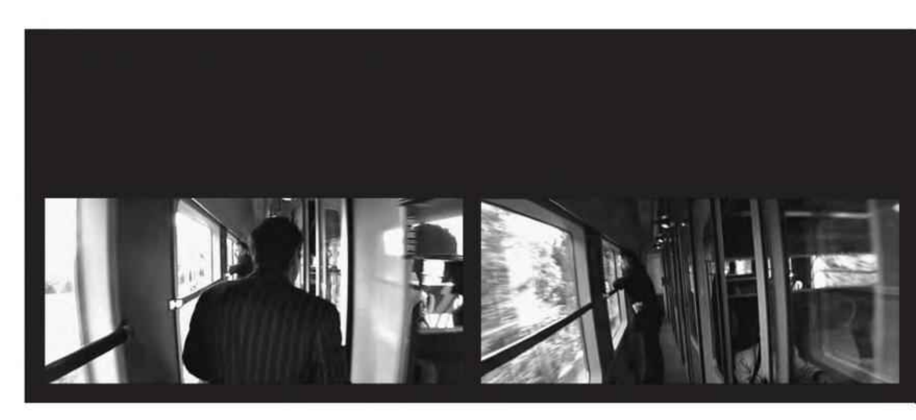
Your character is desperately searching for something, and you need to show the urgency of this search. Whether they're looking for an object or a person, it is a challenge to convey this on film, especially if the one doing the searching has no dialogue.

One technique used by many directors is to keep showing the actor's face, trying to do all the work with the actor's expression. This can work, but often descends into near-farce as the actor is shown over and again looking desperately into a room, then cutting to a Point of View shot. It doesn't really engage the audience.

A solution is to stop trying to show us what the actor's going through, and let the audience experience it. You can do this by shooting from behind the character, and a POV shot. Set up one camera behind the actor, and move with him as he rushes around, looking into rooms and spaces.

Then, reshoot the scene, with the cameraperson emulating the actor's movement and point of view. When you come to edit, you cut rapidly between the two of these. It helps, of course, if you've made it clear what he's looking for, so we know we're looking into rooms and spaces that aren't what he's looking for.

When the object or person is eventually found, that's the best time to cut to a shot of the actor's reaction to this moment.







4.8

STEPS TO SUSPENSE

How do you show almost nothing happening, and keep the audience interested? One of the keys to create tension is to have your character looking or searching for something, while the camera remains rooted to the ground, panning to follow.

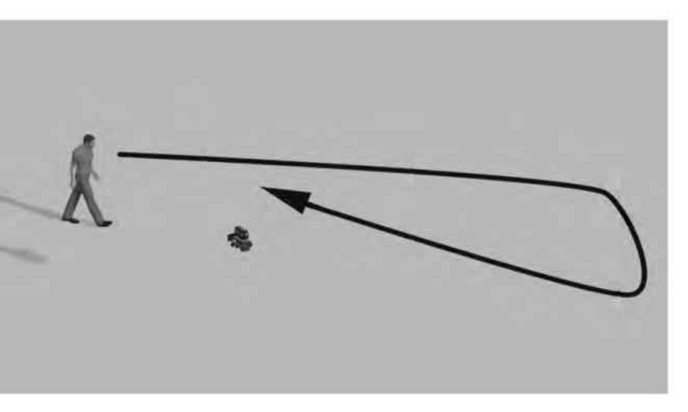
For this to work, the scene has to come in the context of suspense or fear that's already been created, or it might look like your character is simply looking for the car keys. So wait for a point in the film where you want to show the character looking for something or somebody that can't be found.

The frame grabs on the left show only a fraction of what Robert De Niro actually does in these few small moments of the film. He walks from left to right, then slightly up the stairs, back down and into a room on the right before looping back past the camera. This could potentially be deadly dull screen time. It would be a huge mistake, however, to try to add visual interest by moving the camera too much. If the camera followed him around this shot on a Steadicam, it would have almost no tension at all.

Set your camera up so that you can cover your actor's entire movement with nothing more than a pan, and a slight tilt where needed. It helps if there's some payoff at the end, as shown here, where the character of the daughter appears in the background.

You can make this effect even more extreme by setting the camera even further back, and having even less movement, barely even panning. In theory, your camera could be motionless, depending on your location and the exact effect you're trying to create.







4.9

VISUAL DANGERS

According to Alfred Hitchcock's definition of suspense, the audience has to know something awful that the character doesn't know. These days the term "suspense" is used to mean anything from anticipation to tension, but the suspense that Hitchcock was so proud of is a great tool for filmmakers.

One way to make this type of suspense plausible is to show your hero and the danger in the same shot, but with enough distance between them that it's plausible for the character to be unaware of the distance. You need to use a long lens, to foreshorten the distance; otherwise whatever danger is in the background will appear too small.

Set the scene so that your actor is equidistant between the approaching danger and the camera, framed to the side. You will need to use a location where something on the opposite side of the frame to the character, obscures the approaching danger. In this example, the car appears from behind the building. We go from watching a quiet moment of the girl walking, to seeing her pursuers catching up.

You can break the suspense within the same shot, buy having your character turn and see the danger, or by cutting to another viewpoint or angle at the moment of realization.

By using a long lens you also create a slightly eerie, nightmarish effect, where nothing seems to be moving closer, and yet the feeling of pursuit is extremely real.

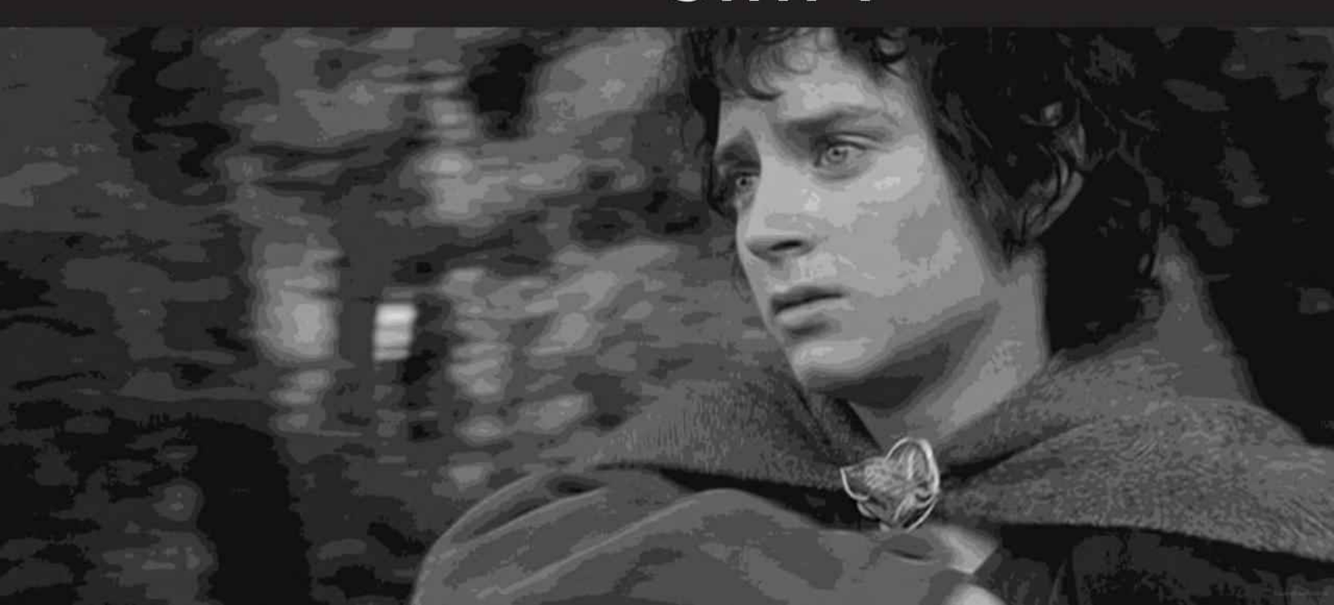






CHAPTER 5

DRAMATIC SHIFT



5.1

FOCUS IN

Once you get used to moving the camera, it's temping to move the camera all the time. A move that's particularly tempting is a relatively fast "push in." In this move, the camera simply moves towards the key character at a moment of change or realization.

Although this is one of the moves most commonly used moves and looks simple enough, it's easy to get it wrong. The audience isn't supposed to notice the camera moving, so much as feel the character's intensity.

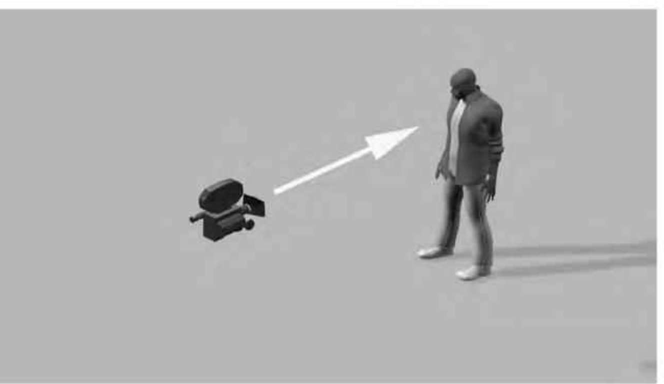
This move can come in the middle of relatively stationary shots, with little movement, or in the middle of a chase scene, so long as it is timed to match the character's reaction.

The main way that people go wrong with this shot is to allow the composition to change, by accident rather than design, as the camera moves in. To prevent this, the camera operator should keep one of the actor's eyes in the exact same part of the frame, throughout the move. It's best to use the eye that's closest to the center of the frame. By keeping one eye in exactly the same place, the audience doesn't feel the camera move, but feels drawn to the character's feelings.

Another mistake that's often made is to have the character's eyeline very close to the camera. The theory generally goes that the closer the actor is to looking into the lens, the more intimately we connect with the character. This is true, but it is wrong to assume that a push in requires a tight eyeline. In reality, too tight an eyeline can make the move feel forced or over-done. Also, it makes it very difficult for the actor to look into the distance when the camera is directly in the way.

Set up your camera at the actor's head height, and use a fairly long lens to throw the background out of focus. A longer lens means you will have to move over a greater distance to make the push in visible. It also means you'll need to pull focus with great precision.







5.2

MOMENT OF DRAMA

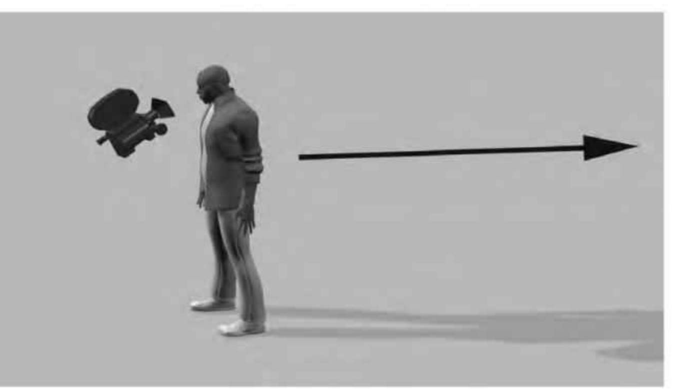
When you need to show a moment of drama so intense that your character can't cope, the standard techniques may not be so useful. In standard cases, drama is emphasized by dollying towards the character. When your character is truly changed or distressed by a moment of drama, it can help to keep the camera still.

Instead of having the camera move, let the actor back away, as though stumbling away from the audience. In this scene, the character is close to the camera. We can't see what he sees, but he is clearly upset and he falls away into the background.

Set up your camera just below the actor's head height, and angle it up towards his face. Use a short lens, so that just a few steps backward will create a large change in the character's apparent size within the frame.

What you'll find, however, is that you can't leave the camera completely stationary, or the actor will drift too low in the frame. The only move you need, however, is a slight tilt down. Any other movement may distract from the effect. This tilt should be just enough to keep the actor's eyes on the same horizontal line throughout the shot. The camera operator needs to anticipate the actor's movement, and it's worth rehearsing this for camera few times before shooting.







5.3

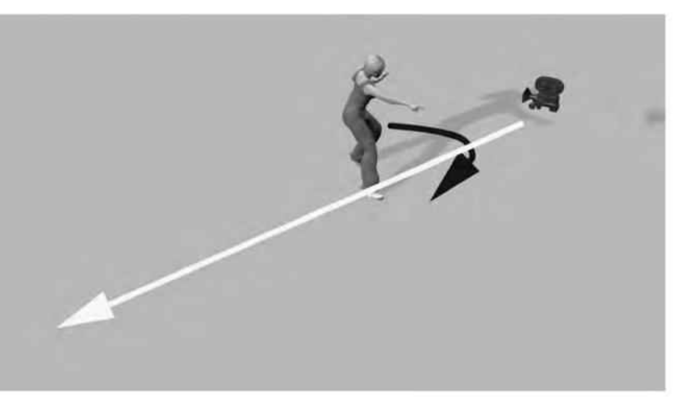
PAN AND SLIDE

At the beginning of a fight scene, or even just a dramatic showdown between two characters, you can emphasize the sensation of overwhelm that your character must be going through. A long, sliding move, which keeps the actor's face in view while making the background rush around the actor, creates a huge sensation of change.

To create this effect, your actor must step around in a little semi-circle, as the camera dollies past and into the distance. This keeps the actor's head facing the camera at all times. It almost feels as though the actor is stationary, and the world in the background is rushing past. The illusion is slight. If you actually placed the actor on a turntable, the effect would look ridiculous, but this move creates that feeling that the actor is suspended in a world that's whizzing around her. It's meant to feel dizzying, and on the big screen, it is.

The effects works best with quite a long lens, and with a fast move over quite a distance. Set up your camera as shown here, close to the actor. The actor should always be looking just past the camera, as though the opponent is directly behind, or next to the camera itself.

As the shot begins, the actor should step around in a semi-circle, until she is facing almost completely the opposite direction. At the same time, the camera dollies past rapidly, panning all the time, to keep the actor framed. When executed carefully, the actor remains almost motionless, while the background rushes past. Only use a move as powerful as this if you're going to follow it up with something truly dramatic. This sort of move announces a big action scene, or dramatic change, so always follow up with one.









5.4

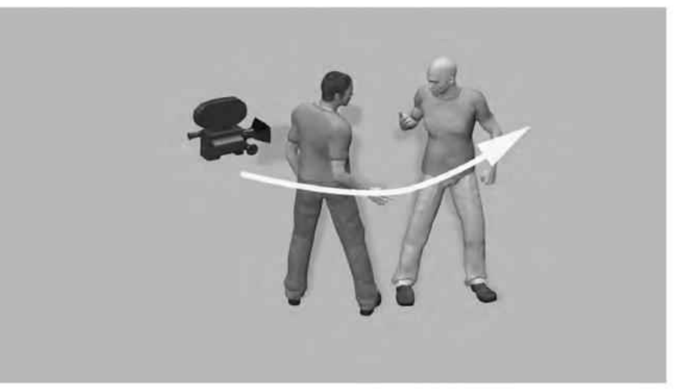
WORKING THE BACKGROUND

This technique is similar to the Pan and Slide, but works best at the end of a scene, rather than the beginning. It's a way of showing a conversation, or fight, come to an end, leaving one character alone in the bewildering world.

The shot begins with an over-shoulder view of the characters talking, and as the character who's facing camera begins to walk away, the camera operator rushes around, effectively taking that actor's place. At the same time, the camera pans rapidly, to keep the second actor in shot throughout the move. In just a few seconds you move from a simple over-shoulder shot, to a dramatic mid-shot of the second character, with the distant background swirling past.

Set up your camera at the actor's head height, using a long lens to emphasize the camera movement and enhance the moving background. The move itself works best if carried out on a dolly, for the smoothness this brings, but the disadvantage of this is that the shot benefits from having a slight arc in the move. Without an arc, you may get too close to the second actor, partway through the shot. If you just set-up the shot with a straight dolly track and the camera on a tripod, you might not get the results you're after. One solution is to use curved tracks, but not everybody has these. Another way to create this arc is by using a crane to swing the camera back briefly. You can also stand on the dolly platform, holding the camera rather than having it on a tripod or crane, and manually pull it back halfway through the move.

The shot can be done completely handheld, or with a simple Steadicam-type rig. Just walk in a semi-circle to take up the final position, and this should give you a sufficient arc for the shot to work well.









5.5

PIVOT ON CHARACTERS

A combination of actor movements and camera movement can signal that a major decision has been made. It's often said that films aren't about thoughts or decisions, but about action. This is because it's very difficult to see a decision on screen. One of the great challenges for directors is turning a decision into an action.

In the frames shown here, Elijah Wood signals as clearly as possible that Frodo's decision has been made, through his expression, but to make this really clear we also need to see him set off on his journey. The decision is made crystal clear through a dramatic camera move. As he moves forwards, the camera rushes towards him, pans to follow him, and keeps moving back. This shift, from a relatively close shot of the actor to seeing him moving into the open world, happens in moments, and signals clearly that a decision has been made.

Set up your camera close to the actor, with a long lens. At the moment of decision, you camera should move towards the actor at the same speed he moves towards you. If you get too close, the actor's face will be lost in the move, so make sure there's sufficient desperation for you to execute a pan that keeps his face in shot.

Once the camera has gone past the actor, keep moving backwards as he moves forwards, widening the shot, and seeing the character swallowed up by the world he's just chosen to enter.

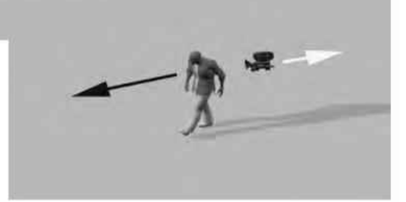
The move can be carried out handheld or with a dolly, so long as the movement is timed exactly to match the character's motion. If the timing is off, the camera moves draws attention to itself, and that should be avoided at all costs. Given that such moments require a lot of skill from actors, rehearse the move often enough that you can get this in a couple of takes. You don't want to wear your actor out while perfecting the mechanics of the move.













5.6

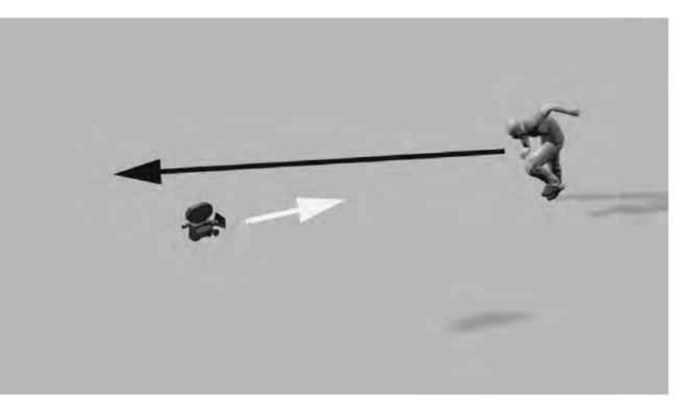
REVERSE ALL DIRECTIONS

This move can be used to show a character facing up to a huge challenge. It works by showing the character run from the danger, then turn to face it. In this example from *Jarhead*, the character isn't running in fear, but to take up a better position. You can adapt this technique, however, to show a character who initially runs in fear, then turns to face the enemy.

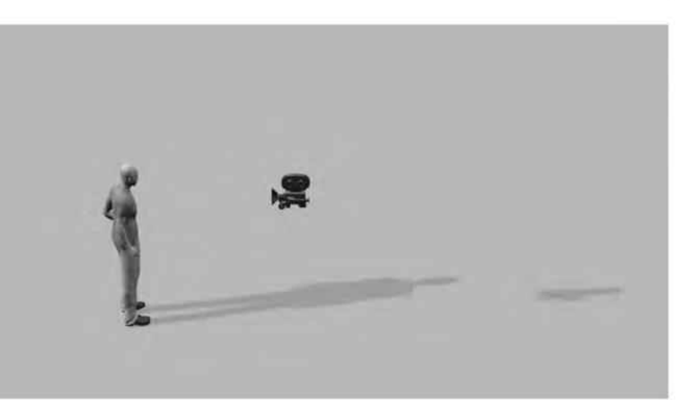
This move requires the actor to run past the camera, and then turn to look back in the direction he came from. At the same time, the camera moves towards the actor, and then swings around as he takes up his final position. The combined movement of actor and camera (as seen in Pivot on Character) creates a great sense of movement, but here, everything comes to a standstill when the actor has turned to face the action.

You can leave the camera alongside the actor, looking across his line of site, or completely reverse the camera direction, to look him straight in the eyes. For the best effect, the camera should be quite close to the actor at the end of the shot. You're not showing the danger (because that was already seen at the opening of the shot); you're showing the character's reaction to the danger, and his preparation for what comes next.

Your camera can be set-up on a dolly, or handheld, and the camera's motion should be motivated by the actor's movement. This move works especially well at the end of a lengthy shot where there hasn't been much camera movement. This sudden lurch into action jolts the audience into realizing that danger is definitely at hand.









5.7

BACKWARDS DOLLY

To show a character feeling trapped in a moment, while also keeping the shot dynamic and interesting, takes some skill. In this scene from *Thirteen*, the character tries to move away from her mother, but her mother tags along in pursuit. It's a dramatic shift, because she's trying to escape, but it's powerful because she can't escape as rapidly as she wants.

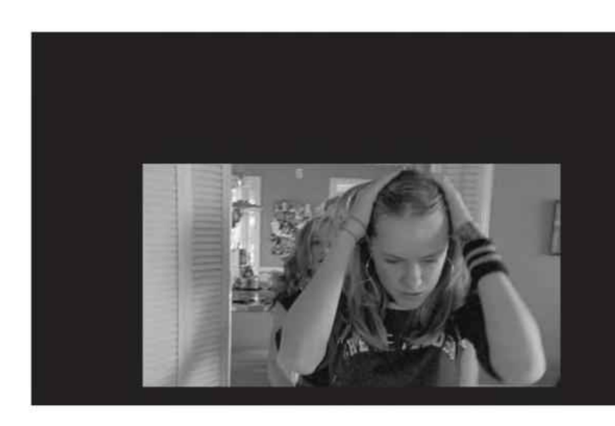
The camera remains quite still through the initial conversation, but when the actor takes off, walking away in despair, the camera backs away from her. The camera keeps the same distance from her throughout. It's almost as though the actor wants the camera to get out of the way. The audience feels this, and feels as though they are in the way as well, and this helps to create tension. It's impossible to watch this scene without feeling the character's anguish.

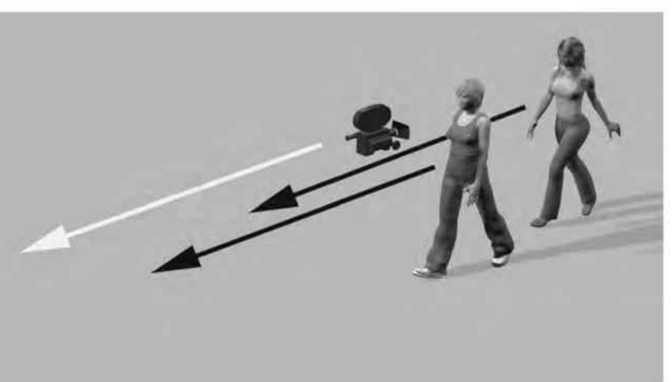
At the same time, the second actor remains in pursuit, at exactly the same distance. Again, this helps to create the feeling of being trapped. We don't get a clear view of the second actor, but this doesn't matter, as the glimpses we get of her are enough to create the feeling of being pursued.

Set up your camera to cover the scene, with room to back off when the right moment comes. When the actor first moves from her mark, keep the camera in the same position until she is right upon the camera. Then begin backing off, almost as though she is pushing the camera out of the way.

Although many backwards dolly shots move from corridor to corridor, if you want to emphasize a character feeling trapped, and trying to escape, stick to a single line of movement down the corridor.

There are many ways to end this shot, such as having the actor move off into a side room or push past the camera. When the actor pushes past, or moves aside, you indicate that the character has taken a significant action.







5.8

UNDERLINING STILLNESS

At the most dramatic moments your character may felt trapped in the moment. If you want your character to feel like a victim, hemmed in by circumstance and the actions of others, you can make great use of stillness. Keep your character still, while the world moves frantically around them.

For the best effect you need your character to be fixing his gaze on something that's behind the camera. You can show the subject of his gaze in another shot, but when you come to execute this move, it's best if carried out without a cut.

The camera pushes in on the character while people move past him, to and fro across the frame. We can see him clearly, because everything else is out of focus, but he struggles to see through the crowd. All the time the camera moves in on him, emphasizing the feeling of being trapped.

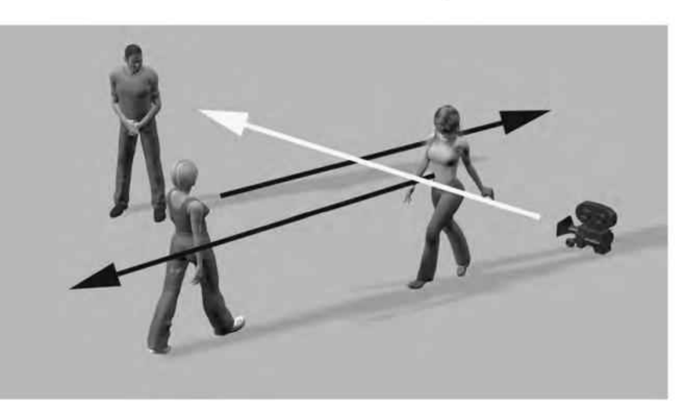
Set up your camera almost directly in front of the actor. It helps if there's a wall or other object directly behind him, filling the frame, to take away any sense of space. A long lens will help to throw foreground and background out of focus.

As the shot begins, dolly towards the actor as he looks past the camera, trying to see through the crowd. You only need a few extras to pass the camera. Too many and you'll hide the actor from view. If possible, avoid two extras passing each other within the frame, as this can distract from the main subject.

Your actor's eyeline should be very tight. That is, he should almost be looking into camera, so that we feel the intensity of his gaze.









5.9

SIMULTANEOUS MOTION

Some of the most dramatic moments happen when a character tries to take action, but simply can't. We see their moment of defeat and suffer with them. Showing an internalized decision is difficult, so this move uses moving props to emphasize the character's separation from her goal.

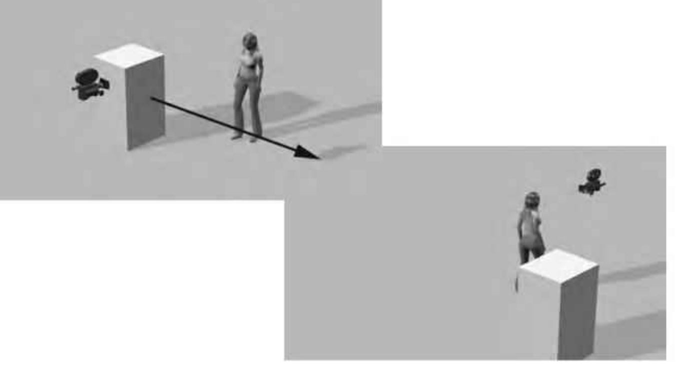
You begin by showing the character in close-up, facing the camera. She then turns away from the camera, as an object passes across the frame. You then cut to a shot from the exact opposite position. This time, she's framed much more loosely, so we can see the prop passing behind her. It's almost as though the passing object has spun her around and away from her goal.

The prop that passes your actor can be a trolley full of boxes, as shown here, a car, or anything else. It must be large enough to be seen in the frame on both sides of the cut, as well as being light and nimble enough to move rapidly in and out of frame in cue.

Set up your camera at head height, with a long lens, and frame for a close-up. The actor looks past the camera, to her goal. At the moment she decides she can't do this, the object should move across the frame, and she turns away from the camera.

Reset the shot, with the camera 180 degrees around from where you began. Use a slightly shorter lens, and get a little closer to the actor, so we get to see the object moving away behind her. Timing is critical. Make sure your actor begins to turn when the object is in exactly the same position as it was in the other shot, or editing will be a huge challenge.







CHAPTER 6

REVELATIONS & DISCOVERIES



6.1

MIRROR DOOR

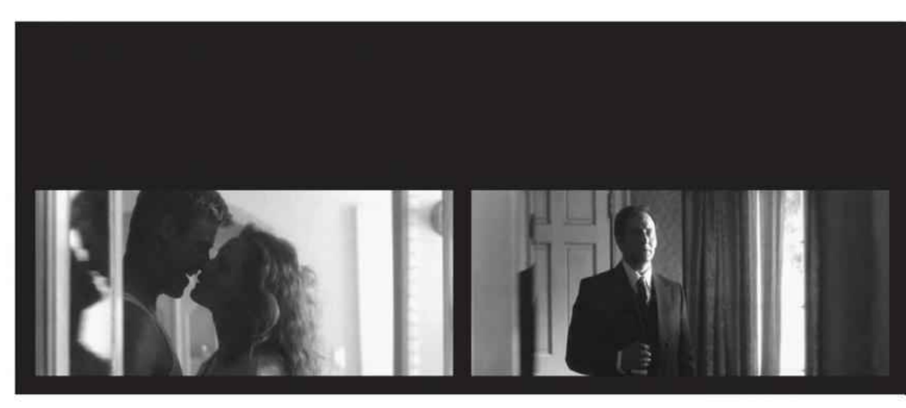
The best directors always look for ways to reveal the scene without too many cuts. This keeps the audience engaged with the scene, and makes any visual revelation much more powerful. Showing everything in one shot also ensures that the audience doesn't become confused about who's doing what to whom.

In the example shown here, a mirror is used to show both directions, without a cut or camera move. We start by seeing a couple through a doorway. One of them reaches to close the mirror-door, and as it slams shut we see the third character, reflected in the mirror, watching them. This is much clearer than if we had cut from the couple to the lone figure, and has the effect of connecting him to his observation.

This technique also enables you to use completely different lighting styles for the two directions, without confusing the audience. If you simply cut from the couple to the observing character, you would need to match the lighting closely, so as to avoid confusion. By connecting the characters in one shot, completely different lighting styles actually enhance the effect you're trying to achieve.

Set up your camera behind the third actor, pointing through the doorway. Use a long lens, but make sure the edges of the doorframe are in view. Give the actors a reasonable motivation to close the door. For the audience, the appearance of the observer should be a shock revelation.

You may need to move your actor out of direct alignment with the door, to get the shot. This is fine, but make sure he looks directly through the door (rather than staring straight ahead), or the audience will detect the false eye-line, and the shot will feel wrong.







6.2

SEPARATING

You can reveal new information within a scene, by first concealing it behind another character. Imagine that you want to show the return of a particular character. As shown in this example, you can hide that character behind the other characters, and then have them move out of the way.

This technique works for other kinds of revelation, wherever the visual presence of a person or object tells the story. Despite the apparent simplicity, it takes some planning to execute this convincingly.

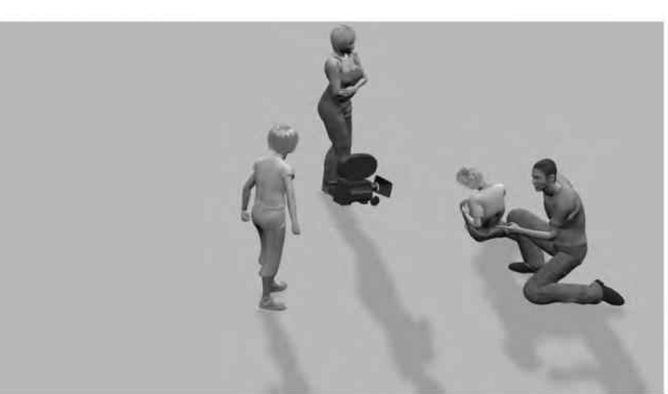
It helps if the person or object being revealed is partially in view at the beginning of the shot, or at least indicated by background activity. If you obscure the background completely, the revelation can be comical. Instead, the background person or object should be blurred and partially shielded.

Set up an over-shoulder shot, leaving enough space between the actors that the background can be glimpsed. The character standing alongside the camera should also experience the revelation at the same time that we do, so make sure it's plausible that the background is hidden from him.

At the moment of revelation have the character that's blocking the view move backwards, or to the side. At the same time, the camera moves forward. This has the effect of moving the point-of-view character out of frame left, as well as bringing the subject of the revelation much closer to camera.

This technique is called Separating, because to get the best effect, there should be a sense that the frame is being opened up; one actor moves to the right (and shrinks in the frame as she moves backwards), while the other moves out of frame to the left as the camera moves. This creates the sensation of curtains being pulled apart to reveal a secret.






6.3

DETAIL IN THE CROWD

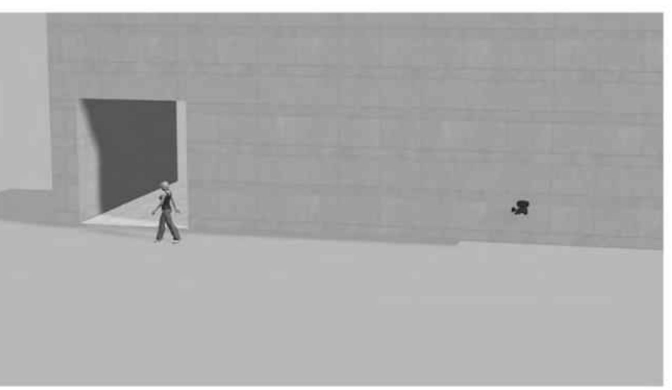
When you want the audience to spot an important character in a crowd, you need to use a careful combination of light and focus to draw their attention. Without this level of care, the shot will reveal nothing, and the character (no matter how famous the actor) will get lost in the crowd.

By using a long lens, you narrow the amount of image that's in focus; this means that when you focus on your character, just about everybody else in the shot drops out of focus. The eye is always drawn to bright sharp areas. By making sure your character is more brightly lit than the rest of the scene, you emphasize the effect.

Set up your camera a long way back from the actor, and use a long enough lens to create the effect. If you're using available light, shoot in a shadowy space, and find a place where sunlight breaks through; position your actor in its glow. If you're lighting the whole set with lamps, give your actor more light than anybody else.

You can enhance the effect by having most of the crowd walking away from the camera, and having your character turn to face camera. If there are lots of faces in the shot, get the background actors to tilt their heads down slightly, or look off to the side a little. Your main character can guide her eyeline close to the camera.







6.4

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

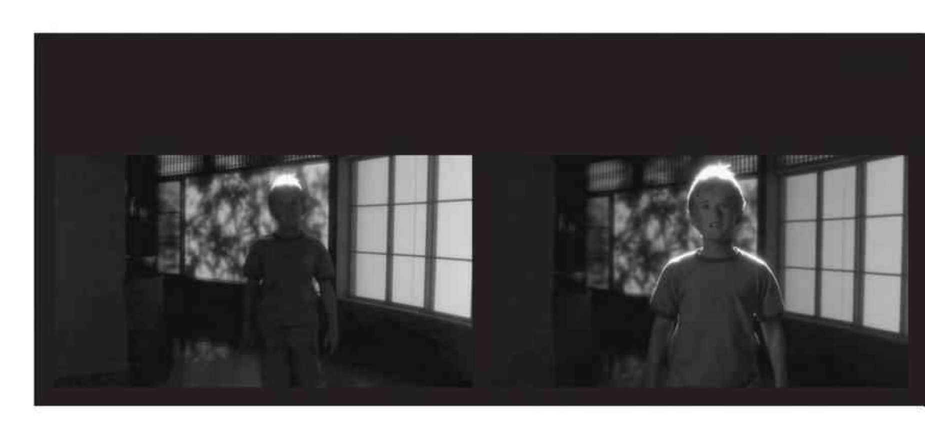
Sometimes you want to re-introduce a character to your film. That is, you want them to make a dramatic entrance to a scene, because you're approaching a significant moment in the film.

An actor's first appearance in a film is of great importance; actors and directors work hard to make sure that a character gets a great entrance. By applying this feeling of a dramatic entry, later on in the film, you reveal to the audience that something major is going on.

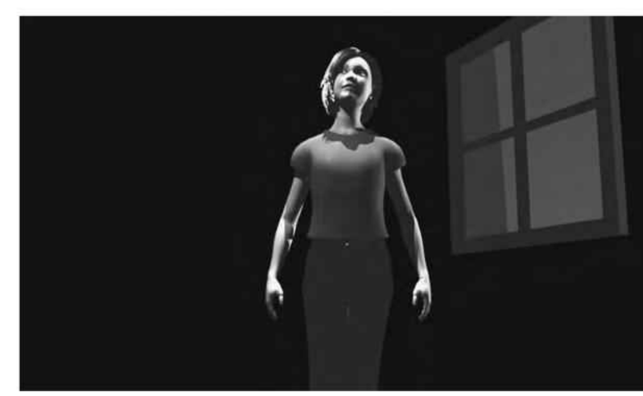
In the example shown here, we see the character's outline, as well as some light in his hair. He then walks out of the shadows and we see his face. This isn't a true revelation, because the moment the audience sees his outline they know this is the main character. This is important, because if he's completely hidden in the shadows it would create too much curiosity about who is hiding there. By showing the audience that this is the main character, they are curious to see his face: what's he going through, how does this affect him, what's he going to do next?

This technique can be used partway through a scene, rather than just at the beginning, to show a shift in the drama. It works particularly well when something major is being revealed to the character in question.

Set up your camera low to the ground, looking up slightly at your actor. There are many ways to light this, but make sure that when the shot begins, the audience knows who they're looking at. Then, have the actor move out of the shadows, and tilt the camera up. Keeping the camera in place creates the sensation of the character walking into the new scene; if you dolly backwards, the actor doesn't feel like he's moving into the scene so much as passing through.







6.5

PULL-OUT REVEAL

When you want to show the audience what your character has just seen, there are many ways to achieve the effect. A simple cut will usually do the trick. Sometimes, though, you want to see the character's prolonged reaction, and let the revelation come over a few seconds. This slow dawning of realization can be more dramatic than instant shock.

In the example here, the camera moves along with the actor; then as she sees the ensuing riot, the camera almost comes to a halt. It moves backwards just a foot or two during the move, panning to follow the actress as she moves past the camera. The shot ends with an over-shoulder framing, showing the crowd struggling to get on the bus.

By blending everything into one shot the director keeps the geography of the scene completely clear, and we also get to see that the confusion around the bus is far more interesting to the character than the riot itself. It's a perfect example of directing attention and revealing new information.

This type of swinging pan works best when there's something in the background moving in the opposite direction. Here, the director had a crowd of rioters pass the actor. This emphasizes that she's moving into unknown territory, and makes us pay attention to what is being revealed.

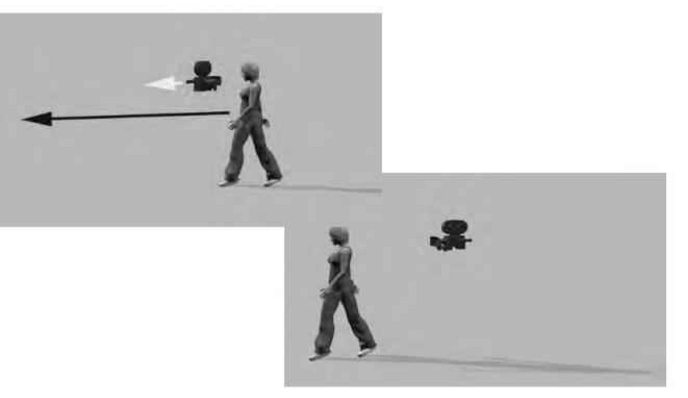
Set up your camera at head height, or slightly higher, and begin the shot at walking pace, moving backwards with the actor. Then, slow the camera, moving backwards only a little, as you follow the actor around. The camera can now move behind the actor, looking past her at the scene beyond.

This type of move works well when performed with a dolly-crane combination, but a handheld move can add to the documentary feel of being in the moment as the drama takes place.











6.6

PARALLEL TRACK

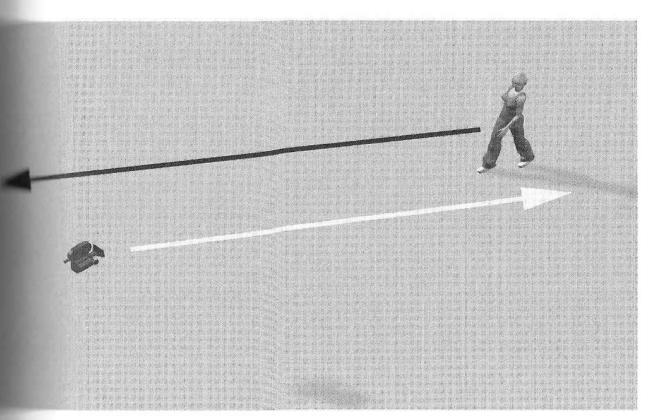
At the moment of revelation, it's important to see the character's response. The parallel track creates the sensation that the character is caught up in a whirlwind of events, while keeping the actor's face in full view throughout the shot.

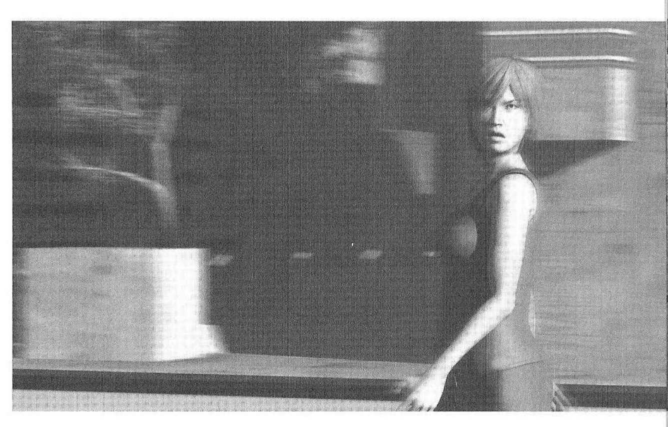
The example here shows how the actor moves to her right, while the camera rushes over to its right. At the same time, the camera pans to keep the actor in the same position in the frame. The effect is that the actor remains almost motionless, while the background rushes past.

In this example the director shot the same scene with two lenses, one much longer than the other. It's possible to jump cut between these two shots, so long as the camera move and framing is relatively consistent between the two. By keeping the actress frame-right throughout, it's easy to make the cut.

Set up your camera with a long lens, as shown in the diagram. When the shot begins, the actor needs a motivation to move, such as trying to get a better view of the action. As she moves, move the camera in the opposite direction, and pan to keep her in the same part of the frame. Repeat with a longer lens, if you want to jump cut between the two shots.







6.7

MOVING ON

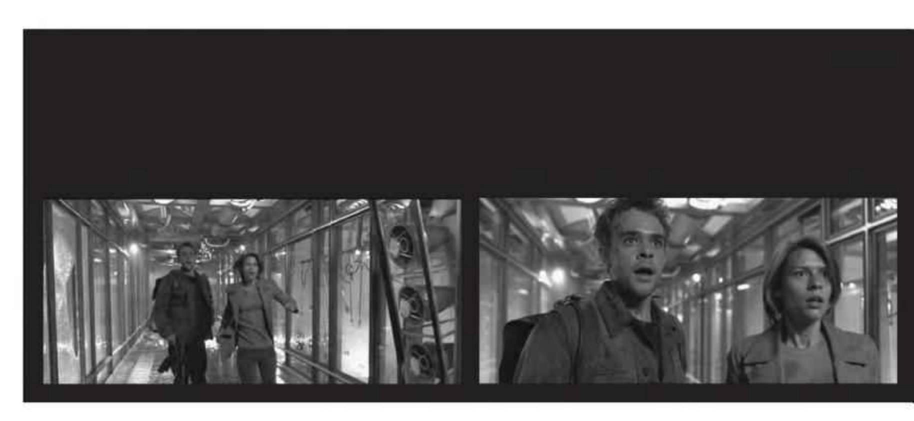
When your characters are trying to escape, or get somewhere urgently, it's always a good idea to stop them in their tracks. Something unexpected should bring them to a halt. At that moment we need to see the look of shock and fear on their faces.

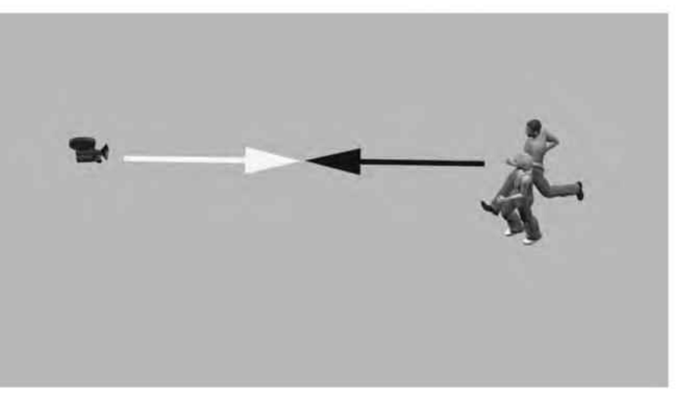
With this move, the camera rushes up to the actors, at exactly the same speed that they rush up to their marks. Even when you use a relatively long lens, this creates a sensation of great speed being brought to an abrupt halt. If you use too short a lens the effect can be too exaggerated, so a medium to long lens works well.

In the examples shown here, the camera moves slightly to the left of the actors. This works well, but you can also start the shot directly in front of the actors, moving slightly to the side as the move progresses.

Set up your camera slightly below head-height. This low angle means that at the end of the shot it almost feels as though the actors are going to run over the top of the camera, which adds to the drama. This low angle also has the effect of obscuring the background, which helps to focus attention on the actors' faces.

Once the move is complete, you need to cut to a point-of-view or over-shoulder shot, to see the subject of their fear.







6.8

EYELINE CHANGE

When one character is joined by another, it's often a surprise for that character, and one that the audience should share. In this example, we think we're watching the character deep in thought, but then the camera move reveals a second character approaching.

To get this right, the character's reaction (to hearing footsteps) should be quite gradual. If he just looks up, and then the camera moves in to show us what he's looking at, the move feels like an after effect. Ideally, the camera should begin to move at the moment he hears the approach, and be in its final position when he's completely turned his head.

This works well when one character is seated and the other is standing. Whatever position you choose for the first character, set-up your camera at his head height.

Begin the move when the actor senses an approach. At first, this should look like a classic push-in on the character, keeping him framed in roughly the same position. Towards the second half of the move, the pan begins and we turn to see the second character.

You will need to pull focus between the first and second characters, and the timing of this is critical. Too early, and the main character goes out of focus while in shot. Too late, and the second character looks like they're in a dream sequence. Begin to shift focus at the moment the second character enters the frame, and complete the focus change as rapidly as possible.









6.9

EYE SLIDE

A character's point of view can be one of the strongest ways to reveal new information. This works well when your character is expecting to see one thing, but actually sees another. In the example shown here, the character thinks he is creeping up on a sniper. When he gets there, it's actually a tailor's dummy dressed as a sniper.

After building expectation, it takes a lot of visual effort to break that expectation. Although the wide shot clearly shows the dummy, it takes a moment for the audience to work out what they're looking at, because they were expecting something else. The audience goes through exactly the same moment of surprise as the character. If you only use the wide shot, you'll find you have to linger on it for quite some time, to make your point. Instead, you can use the Eye Slide move.

Cut to a longer lens, giving a closer look at the object or person in question. In reality, your character can't zoom in his vision, but the use of a longer lens simulates his attention being drawn into the details. He looks at one end of the dummy, and then slides his eyes rapidly to the other end. This fast motion, between slight pauses, creates a dynamic shot that gets the information across.

Set up your camera a good distance away from whatever object or person you're revealing. It helps to create tension if you're looking through something else, such as a hole in a wall. Shoot the scene with the camera motionless. Then change to a long lens. Start the shot at one end of the object, pause, then whip pan to the other end of the object.







CHAPTER 7

SHOCK HORROR



7.1

BUILDING TENSION

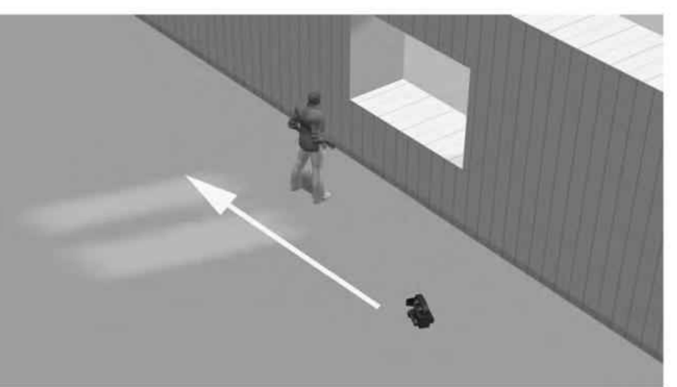
One way to create suspense is to stare into empty space, expecting something to appear. To make this even more frightening, you can hide the view from the audience for a while.

In the example shown here, the character is staring into an empty corridor, listening for sounds of approach. That is frightening enough, but is made more tense by beginning the shot with the empty corridor out of view. As the camera slides along behind the character, and we finally get to look down the corridor, the tension is unbearable.

The move itself is nothing more than a simple track and pan, but knowing when to use this is key. It doesn't work if you're actually revealing something in the corridor. If you reveal a big alien at the end of the corridor, revealed as the camera slides across, that simply leaves the audience feeling cheated, because they were excluded from information known to the character. By tracking across to show empty space, the audience shares the character's unease.

Your character should, therefore, be staring through a doorway, down an alley, or into another space. Set up your camera low to the ground, to increase the sense of vulnerability. Frame your character on the left, and maintain this framing as you track across. When the move is complete, your character will either turn and run, or walk into the empty space.







7.2

MISDIRECTION FOR SHOCK

Audiences love to jump at a moment of surprise, but they hate it when you try to surprise them and fail. With modern audiences being so aware of movie techniques, it's more difficult than ever to make them jump. Many directors fail, because they show the protagonist walking down a corridor with their back to a big empty space, and the audience just knows something is going to jump out.

A variation on this technique is to show the character shocked by something mundane, such as a can of paint falling over, and just as they sigh with relief, the serial killer jumps out. Again, this is such a cliché that the audience nearly always sees it coming, and there is no genuine surprise.

To actually surprise the audience, you need to use this technique in a more subtle way. You want to build tension, apparently relieve tension and then when the audience relaxes, shock them. One way is to have the character apparently distracted by something off-screen. In this example from *Minority Report*, Tom Cruise leans over the pool, and we're tense, wondering if something is going to happen. But then he looks up and calls across to somebody off-screen. Just at the moment we're wondering who he's talking to, the girl leaps out of the water, and the audience jumps out of their seats.

Set up your camera so that your character appears to be alone in the shot. You can go in quite tight, but if you stay out wide the audience is less suspicious of an impending surprise.

Have the character look past the camera, to something off-screen. This forces the audience to wonder what he's looking at, who he's talking to, and what he's about to say. This is a genuine distraction, and means the audience is guaranteed to be surprised. A moment after the second character (or monster) jumps out, cut to a tight close-up, perhaps from an extreme angle, so that we engage with the character's shock.

Rather than just having a random noise happen off-screen, which catches the character's attention, there should be a legitimate reason that the character looks off-screen. In *Minority Report*, Cruise's character asks a question to somebody off-screen, which makes perfect sense for his character at that moment. This is better than forcing a random event to happen, just to create the distraction. The more logical and character-driven the distraction, the better the surprise will be.













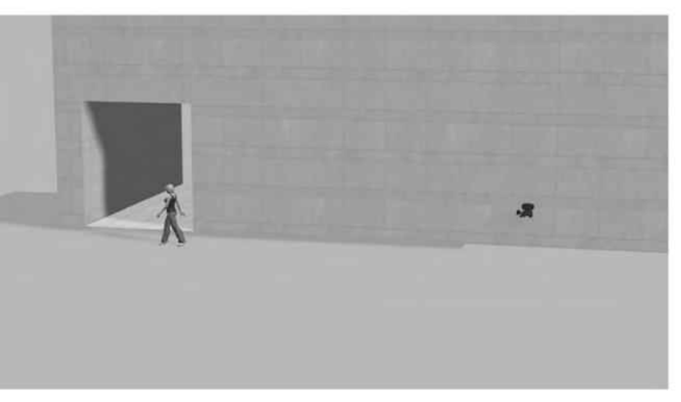
7.3

FEARING A CHARACTER

Characters who've been driven over the edge are usually far more frightening than any monster. A good script and good acting are essential (as always) but the performance can be enhanced greatly by a simple camera move. Essentially, you keep the villain's eyes in the exact same part of the frame throughout the scene.

The example shown here was shot by Kubrick in the squarish 4:3 aspect ratio, but was cropped to widescreen for the cinema. In both versions, the effect is the same, because no matter how Jack Nicholson moves, the camera compensates to keep his eyes in the same part of the screen. This is true within each shot, and even between shots in the same scene. To make this even more frightening, the victim appears in the same part of the frame as well. This is only possible when you frame your characters centrally. The slight "jump cut" feeling adds to the effect. It also applies whether or not you're using an over-the-shoulder shot.

How you set-up your camera will depend entirely on the subject matter of the scene, but to get this move right, direct your camera operator to keep the actor's eyes in the same part of the frame. Direct your actors to limit head and body movement, so the camera doesn't have to jerk around to follow them. To create the sense of fear, have one character back off, while the other follows. As Kubrick illustrates, you don't need to be limited to straight lines or one level for this shot to work.





7.4

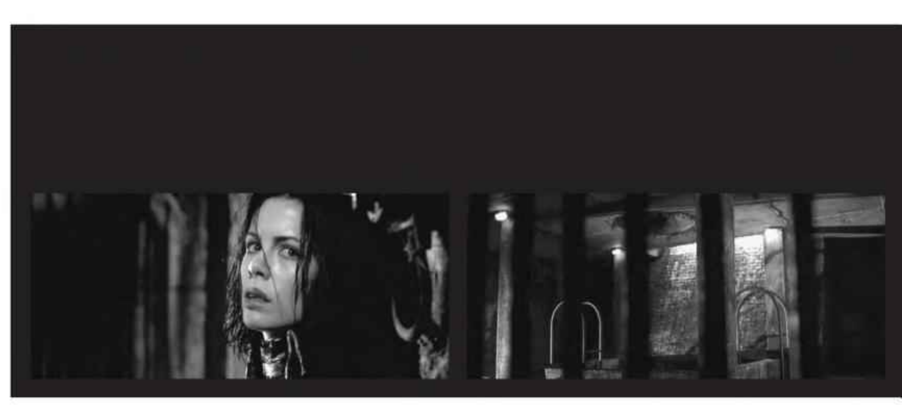
FEARING A PLACE

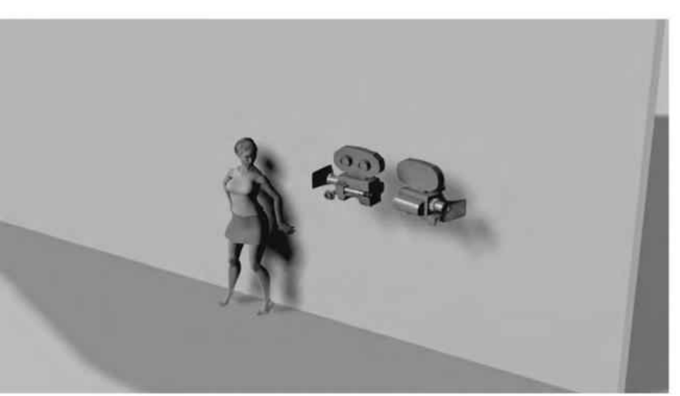
In horror movies and thrillers, we expect characters to be afraid of other people, monsters, explosions and so on. Surprisingly, though, the fear of a place is one of the most powerful ways to convey a character's unease. In truth, nobody is ever scared of a place; you're scared of what might be there, or what might appear. In that moment, though, you look into the empty space and feel the fear. If you can capture this on film, you create a strong moment that will live on in the audiences' mind.

The way you position your actor is a crucial part of this. The effect you want to achieve is of feeling somewhat trapped, but at the same time being in a relatively open space. This apparent contradiction is solved by putting your actor up against a wall, as shown in this example. This lets the audience see that the character is backed up against a wall (literally and metaphorically), and that there is a long corridor behind her. This is much more effective than showing a shot from directly in front of her.

Her gaze, past the camera, makes us want to see what she's seeing. When we then cut to the shot of an empty space, we share her fear of this place, wondering what's going to happen next.

Place your actor against a wall or other object, and position the camera as close to the wall as possible. Frame the actor so that she is to one side of the screen revealing the dark space behind her. Then, reverse the camera, and show the empty space she's looking at. Do not shoot from behind the actor, as this is meant to be a point of view, and the actor should not be seen in the shot at all.







7.5

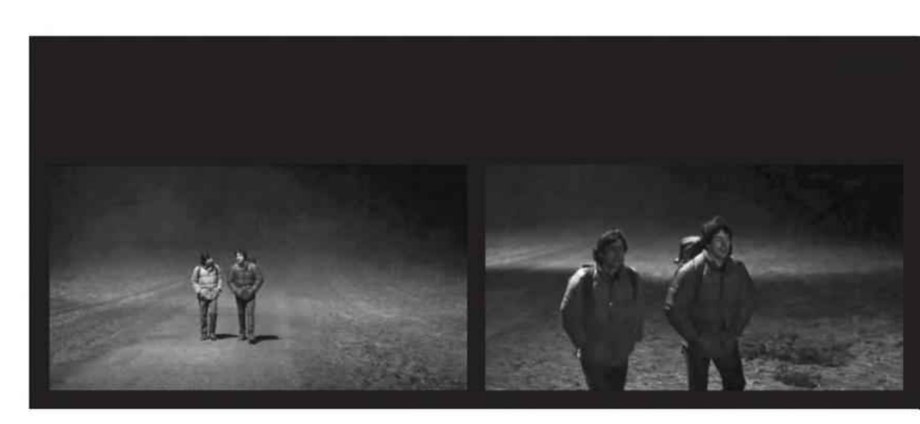
WIDE SPACES

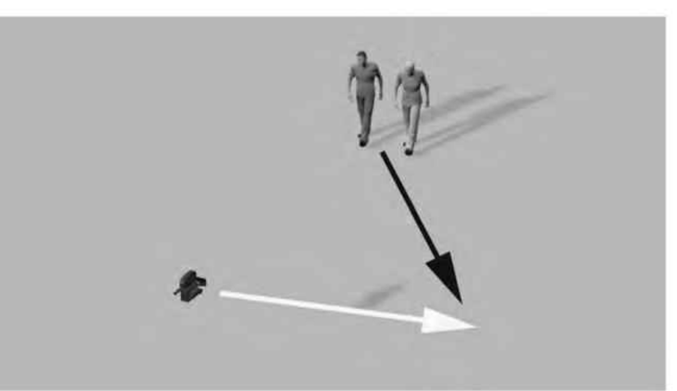
When your characters are walking in a wide-open space, there are many opportunities to create fear. The example shown here demonstrates how a change of direction signifies a move into danger. In this particular shot it's emphasized because the characters are leaving a visible path, but it works equally well when no path is visible.

The shot begins with the characters in a wide space, which is scary, because the light drops off so dramatically. What's unseen in the dark captures the imagination of the audience. The characters then move off their path, and the camera moves with them. To the audience, this feels as though they're moving out of the light and into the darkness. If this takes place in daylight, it feels like moving from the known and ordinary into the unusual and frightening. It's so powerful that it should be used only when your character is truly taking a step into the unknown.

Set up your camera directly in front of the actors, and have them walk towards the camera. When they get quite close, have them move off their path (whether there's an actual path or not) and track with them. The track shouldn't be quite fast enough to keep up, so that they move out of the frame as they walk.

The timing of your tracking move is critical. It should begin at the moment the actors move off the path. Although this move is quite abrupt and noticeable, that's what you want. If you started the shot with camera moving, the audience would not sense any change when the actors move off the path. Keep the camera still, and then move with the actors. It's important to let them move out of the frame, to signify that they're going into the unknown.







7.6

VISUAL SHOCK

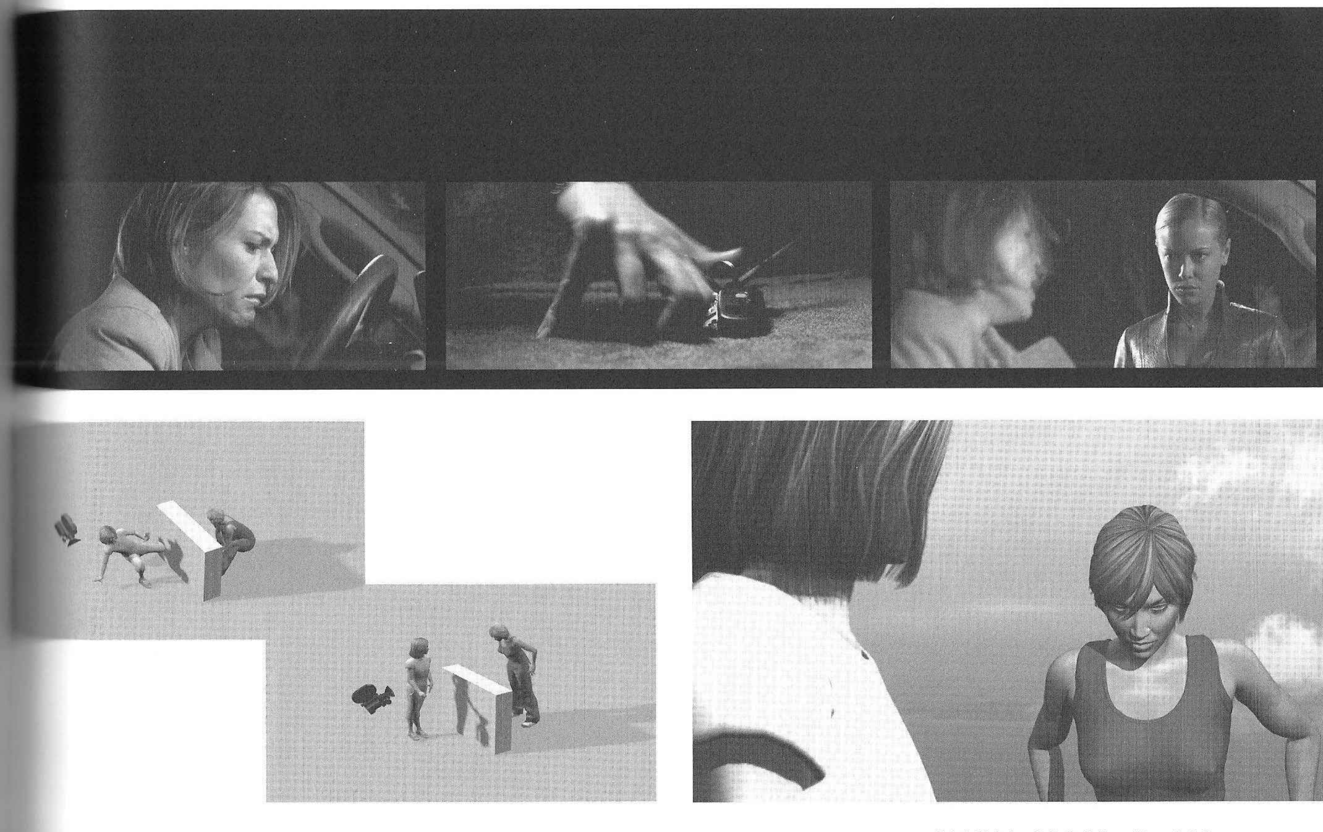
One of the best ways to give your audience a fright is to fill a previously empty space with something unexpected. In this example, we see Claire Danes struggling to start her car, and as she bends to pick up her keys we see the empty space through the window. When she sits back up, her attacker is standing outside the window.

To get this to work, you don't want the audience to know that a surprise is coming within the same shot. They know a surprise is going to happen soon, because the character is being pursued, but you need to misdirect them. Here, the struggle with the car keys appears to be the subject of the shot, even though it's actually building up to the moment of shock.

The effect works best when there are no cuts, so your move should begin by showing an empty space behind the actor, then move to show something else, then move back to show the space refilled. This does not work well if you neglect to show the empty space first. If this shot began on the car keys, then moved up to reveal the attacker, there wouldn't be much surprise at all.

Set up your camera so that the foreground actor appears to be framed in a relatively conventional way. That is, don't leave a huge empty space around or behind her, as this gives the game away. So long as the audience sees an empty space, even if glimpsed, that is enough.

Move or tilt your camera to follow the action. Make sure the motivation is realistic, such as a dropped object. When the actor moves back into the original position, move the camera into its original position. Block carefully, to ensure that the second actor is clearly framed, perhaps by getting the foreground actor to sit further back than before.



7.7

A CHANGE OF MIND

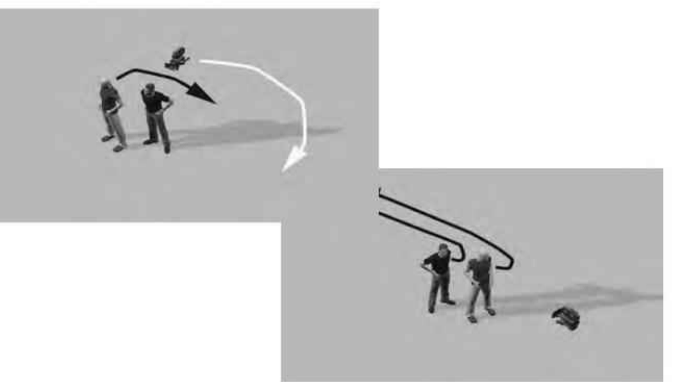
When a pursuit is underway, one of the ways to make it seem more horrific and frightening, is to have your characters struggle to even choose an escape route. Rather than seeing them run, watch them struggle as they move in one direction and then another. You can emphasize this by moving the camera round them as they shift.

The example shown here illustrates this well. Upon hearing the howling, they characters turn away from the camera. The camera moves faster than they do, and gets in front of them as they come to a halt, uncertain of where to go. Once again, they turn and move away from the camera. Although they are in a different place, this repetition of their turn and move away from the camera is essential for the best effect. Without this repetition you still create a sense of unease, but the repetition emphasizes that they aren't really getting anywhere.

You can start your shot with the characters facing the camera, but they should then turn and move to the side. As they do, arc your camera round them, moving faster than they do. It's almost as though the camera gets in their way and causes them to stop. Then they turn around and walk away from the camera once more.

You can cut between several different versions of this shot, to really stress how trapped they feel. When the attacker is heard but unseen, you get the strongest sense of despair.




7.8

SHIELDING ATTACKER

Misdirection is the key to creating surprise. If the audience is convinced to pay more attention to something else, they will be surprised when the attacker returns. For this to work you need it to seem impossible for the attacker to catch up, and you need to give the audience something else to focus on. Here, Harrison Ford is struggling on a window ledge. That gives the audience something to think about. They don't forget that the attacker is out there, but they're wondering whether he'll fall, rather than whether he'll be attacked. Secondly, it seems impossible that the attacker could leap out here; it's a window ledge, after all. When the attacker bursts through the window, it's a complete surprise, and the audience jumps out of their seats.

Set up your camera with a long lens, with the unseen attacker closer to the camera than the other actor. This makes the attacker's appearance more dramatic. The long lens also foreshortens the distance, making it seem unlikely that anything or anyone could fit into that space and increasing the moment of surprise.

Time the attacker's appearance to come just a moment after the other actor makes a move. As Harrison Ford reaches for the window ledge, that's the moment the foot bursts through the window. By combining many layers of misdirection, you create a strong effect.







7.9

WINDOW OF FEAR

There are few things as frightening as a face appearing at a window. The problem is that we are so used to seeing frightening faces appear at windows, that the moment we see an empty, dark window, we expect to see a face there. If you want the moment to really shock, you have to give the audience something else to think about.

The trick is to have your character do two things at once. In the example shown here, the character is tying to do something to the door, at the same time as she's trying to do something with the faucet. She can't quite reach both at once. By having her torn between the two things, the audience is directed to really pay attention to her struggle. We watch her hands; we try to work out if it's possible for her to do both things at once. This means we completely forget about the blank, dark window, even though we know it's there.

Better still, her movement between the faucet and the door means that as the camera follows her movement, the window goes momentarily out of frame. When the window reappears, the face is in shot.

Your camera can be set-up on a tripod, with no more movement than a simple pan to follow your actor's movement. What's important is that you set-up a plausible conflict for her to deal with. Make sure she has two pressing needs that she needs to move between, in order to make the audience forget about the window.







CHAPTER 8

DIRECTING ATTENTION



8.1

OBJECT GUIDE

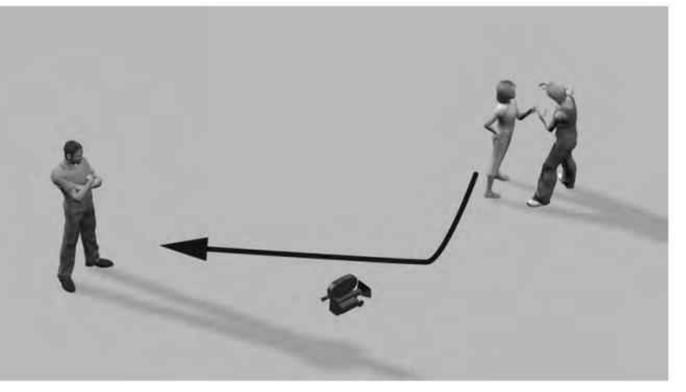
When you're shooting a continuous scene – without cuts – how do you move from one place to the other without it seeming forced? In truth, most directors don't bother about this, and either cut from one place to another, or just pan from once character to another. That's fine, but not as flowing and beautiful as a choreographed shot that camouflages the movement behind an action.

This example shows how a relatively insignificant piece of paper is used to give the camera a motivation to move. The first character hands it to the second, and we follow her as she takes it to the third. The piece of paper is not insignificant, but neither is it the focus of the scene. It merely gives us a reason to move from the right of the set to the left. When executed well this is far more satisfying than simply cutting, or swinging across without motivation.

In this example, the two sides of the scene are in communication with each other. They are talking to each other across the café, so the move joins the two parts of the scene. You can use this technique equally well to end one isolated conversation, and move to another within the same location.

Set up your camera so that you can see the whole scene just by panning. Although you can track in the middle of this shot, the simple version involves nothing more than a pan. There are no set rules about how to frame or compose the beginning and end shots, except to say that each should be composed as though it was a finished shot in itself The transition, where the actor moves past the camera, should be relatively brief, as it isn't interesting enough to hold the attention for more than a moment. It is a transition, rather than a journey.







8.2

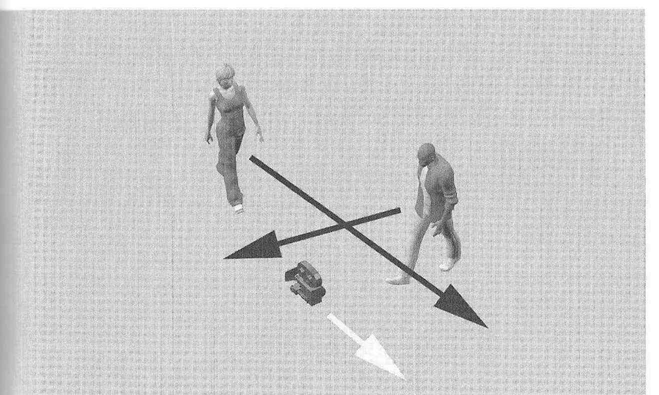
HANDING OFF MOTION

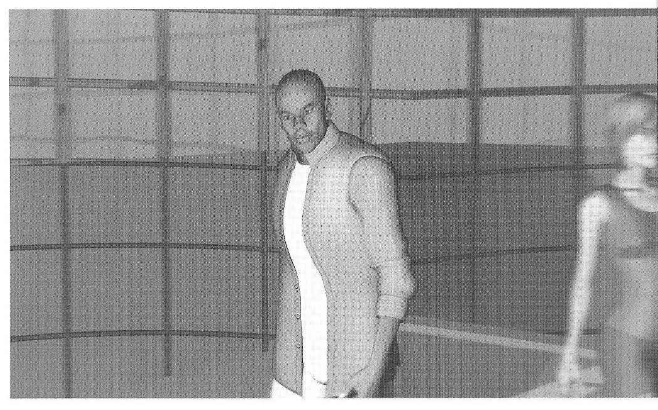
In a busy scene, where more than one thing is happening at once, you can switch between the main areas of action with a subtle camera move. This enables you to show the whole scene without a cut. Although there has been a trend, in recent years, to cut-cut-cut in order to imply that things are moving fast, you can do more by avoiding a cut altogether. By letting a busy scene play out, the viewer sees all the various story threads taking place in one frame, and it enhances the sense of urgency and drama.

For this to work, you want the characters to be on the move, shifting around the room. Give them good motivation – they should be fetching a file, for example. Don't just have them wander around (unless, of course, that is the point of their character). In the example shown here, James Woods is wandering soulfully through the chaos, and that's the point. He's meant to be a center of focus in the middle of the drama.

The move itself is nothing more than a backward dolly, timed to coincide with a character's movement. Here, Jodie Foster moves towards the camera, and it backs off, as if to make room for her. As it does so, a space is left open for James Woods, and then the focus is on him.

To the audience there is no sense of a camera move, only the sense that we're first with one character, and then with another, as a fast-moving scene takes place.





8.3

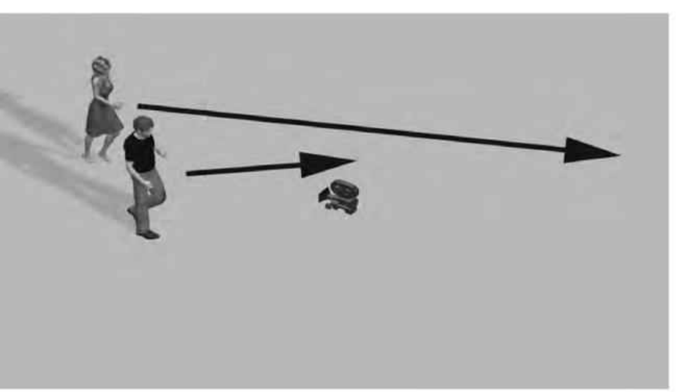
CHANGE OF DIRECTION

A sense of space is sometimes essential to the story, and you want to show the audience that your characters are located within the space. Rather than just panning around to show them the space, you can use the characters' motion to motivate a camera move that lets the audience see the whole landscape. Of course, they don't see everything, because the crew are all standing behind the camera, but they get to look in both directions, and it feels as though they've seen the whole landscape.

You could just point the camera at the actor and pan with them as they walk past, but this lacks any sense of dynamic motion or flow. It's better to move the camera with the actors, dollying backwards as you go, and then have one character move faster than the other. As she runs or jogs past the camera you pan with her, slowing the move to a rest. You do need a good motivation for her to run – don't simply have her speed up because it's convenient for your camera move.

It helps if the actor who moves faster is initially behind the other character. This emphasizes her sudden movement. Rather than having her run straight forward, have her run across the other actor's path. This brings her much closer to the camera, which adds to the sense of speed. This is important for the camera move to be carried off without drawing attention to itself. You don't want the audience to sense a big camera move; you just want them to watch a character run off into the wider world.

You can think of many variations, with one or more characters moving off, but the advantage of having just one character run is that she can look back towards the off-screen character, which lets us see her face. A face is usually more interesting than the back of somebody's head.






8.4

REFLECTIONS

Some of the great directors, such as Steven Spielberg, use reflections so frequently that it is almost a trademark. There is a good reason for this. Reflections enable you to show two things at once. In the example shown here we can see Irene Jacob's reaction to the choir, while seeing the choir at the same time. This is far more elegant than cutting from a shot of her to a point of view shot.

You can use this to direct the audience's attention to the background, by having the actors stare off-screen. This guides our eyes to the side of the frame where the reflection lies.

The larger the mirror, the more flexibility you will have in setting up this shot. Where possible, have the actor actually look at the subject they are meant to be looking at. It's common to cheat eyelines in many shots, but when using reflections a cheated eyeline can register with some viewers as being somehow wrong.

Reflections can be used in slow, gentle scenes, as shown here, or it can be used at a moment of revelation. As somebody bursts through the door, you can show the appearance and reaction in the same moment. Lens choice is challenging. If you use too wide a lens, then the reflected subject may appear too distant. But with a long lens, the reflection will always be blurred unless you pull focus to the background (taking the foreground out of focus). For sudden revelations, you may need to cut shortly after the moment of shock, to show a close-up of the person who's just burst in, to help solve this problem. You certainly don't want to keep focusing backwards and forwards between foreground and background, as that doesn't guide attention so much as confuse the viewer.

Don't be limited to mirrors. You can use glossy tables, walls and other objects. Watch Spielberg's *AI* to see countless uses of reflections to show two things happening at once.







8.5

REST POINT

You often need to show a character reacting to a physical object that is handed to them, such as a letter. There's obvious impact to be had when this revelation brings the character to a halt, and literally stops them in their tracks.

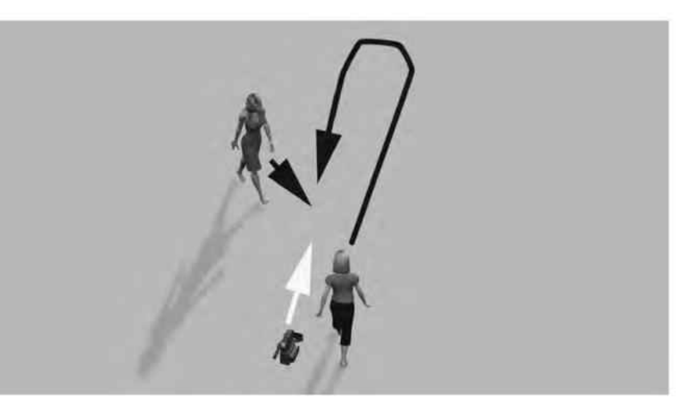
This camera move doesn't follow any of the objects or characters directly, but is always heading for a close-up with the main character in the scene. This creates a great sense of gravity, as though this moment of revelation was inevitable. The camera moves straight there, letting the actors move away, in and out of shot, but ends in that close-up.

In the example shown here, the shot begins with the camera following the actors as they run for a school bus. As the bus (and the mother holding the letter) comes into view, the camera continues to move at the same pace, even though the actors speed up. The camera continues its move, passing the mother, as the daughter turns and comes back. The camera stops when it gets close to the daughter. It's a brief series of movements and motions.

Plan this scene so that, wherever the shot begins, the actor ends on a mark just in front of the camera's resting point. You need to time this so that the actor comes to rest at the same moment as the camera, or perhaps a beat or two earlier.

It's vital that your actor initially ignores the letter – or other object – so that she moves off into the background. If she simply stops when the object is offered, the effect is destroyed. The sensation you're creating is of a magnetic moment, and everything is drawn into it, including the camera.




8.6

COLOR GUIDES

Color can be used to direct the audiences' attention just as effectively as any camera move. In this scene, the audience needs to know that when a figure appears distant and blurred behind Jim Carrey, it's the same character we saw earlier. By giving the character a striking colored jacket, the effect is achieved.

You can't give a character a bright orange jacket if it doesn't suit their character, but you can always introduce an element of contrast. The effect is enhanced here by the fact that the rest of the shot is graded down to blue. There are almost no colors other than the blue wash of the entire shot, with a dot of orange. When Kate Winslet appears behind Jim Carrey, the audience has no doubt who they're looking at. We've just seen a reasonably close shot of her in the orange jacket, so the connection between orange and the character has been made. If she was wearing an indistinct color, then her blurred appearance in the background would not be so obvious.

This technique is particularly useful when the background character's appearance is significant, in one way or another, to the foreground character. There should be no slow dawning for the audience; we need to know in a beat who that is in the background.

You can use a long lens, quite close to the foreground actor, letting the background blur out. The sub-conscious audience expectation is that a shot like this will only focus on the foreground, but the splash of color draws attention to the background, and then the foreground actor reacts.







8.7

REVERSE ANGLES

When people argue, or discuss anything dramatic or important, they rarely stay still. You need to direct the audience's attention to the character who's dominating the scene (talking most) at any time.

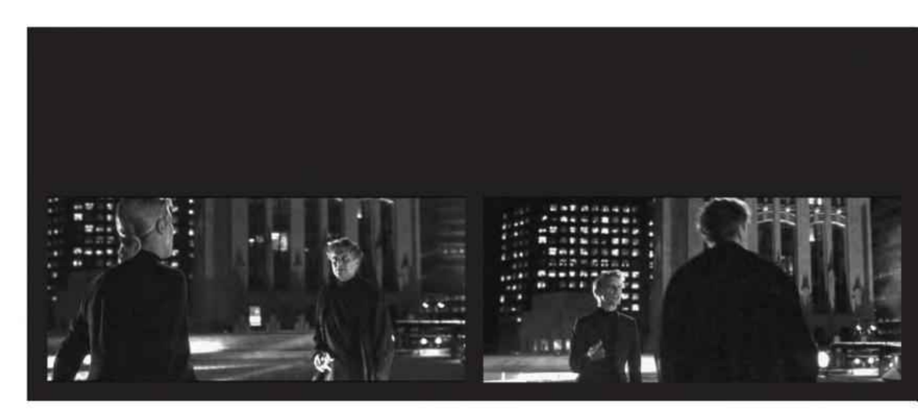
When you shoot a scene like this, the actors will want to be on the move, and it will look better if they are. People who argue circle around and pace. The challenge for you is to capture this movement without the audience losing track of where they are in the shot. One way is to shoot a relatively wide master shot, with almost no movement.

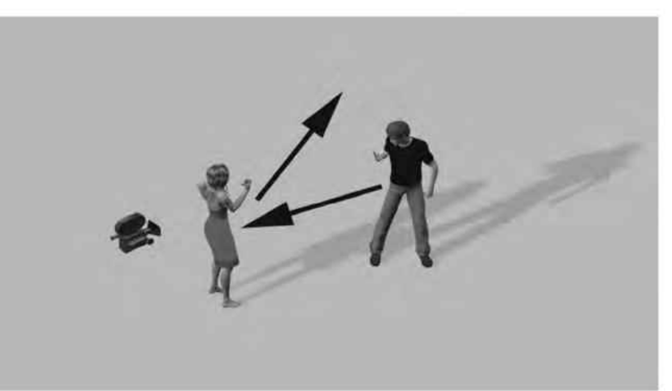
By keeping the camera essentially in the same place, and moving the actors, you can capture all the motion and emotion of the scene without any complex moves.

To make this work, you need to block the actors' movements so that the character who is doing most of the talking faces the camera. Then, when the second character does most of the talking, the actor's motion should already have taken place, so that she is now the one facing the camera.

The main problem with a shot like this is that there is always one actor facing away from the camera. Make sure you give that actor enough body movement and body acting, to give them a presence throughout the scene. You aren't shooting close-ups, so both actors have to give it their all in every shot.

If, while shooting this, you feel you didn't get a single perfect take, you may need to shoot some coverage to enable a cut. This doesn't have to be coverage of the face; you could just as easily get coverage of hand and foot movements, which would enable the cut, while maintaining focus on the energy of the argument.







CHAPTER 9

CAR SCENES



9.1

FRONT SEAT SHOOTING

There are few contemporary films that don't have a scene set in a car. The challenge is to get good shots, without having to spend all day setting up complex rigs to carry the car and vehicle. The alternative, low-budget approach is used in many films with great success. You put the camera in the car with the actor, and shoot from one seat to the next.

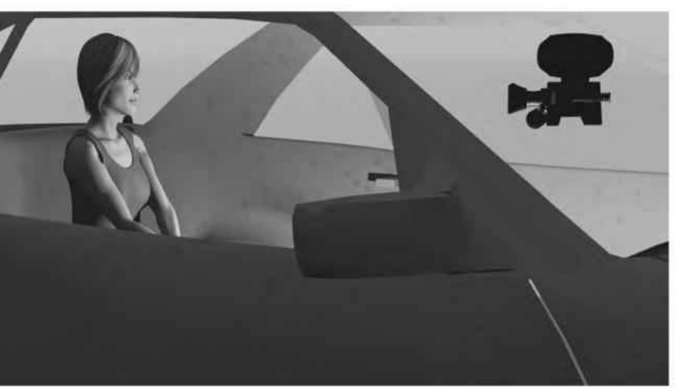
In the simplest terms you place the camera in the front seat, and point it into the back of the car. By using a long lens, you let the actor's face dominate the scene, so that it's about the actor and not the car.

There are many ways to stabilize the camera, such as tying it to the car, or keeping it handheld and letting your body absorb the shocks from the car. Whatever approach you use, make sure you drive the car at an abnormally slow speed. So long as the background is moving a little, you'll create the sensation of the car moving along. You don't need to speed along when all you're filming is a conversation.

As a general rule, the actor usually looks across the empty space in the frame, but that's not usually possible with this sort of set-up. As you can see from this example, Winona Ryder looks to screen right (even though the empty frame space is screen left). This feels a little unbalanced, which is perhaps why her hand is in shot, to help fill the empty space.

You can shoot two people in the back seat, talking, with this set-up. Shoot a close-up for each, and also try for a wider shot that shows their interaction. If the person in the backseat is communicating with the driver or front seat passenger you'll also need to use the Back Seat Shooting technique in the next chapter.







9.2

BACK SEAT SHOOTING

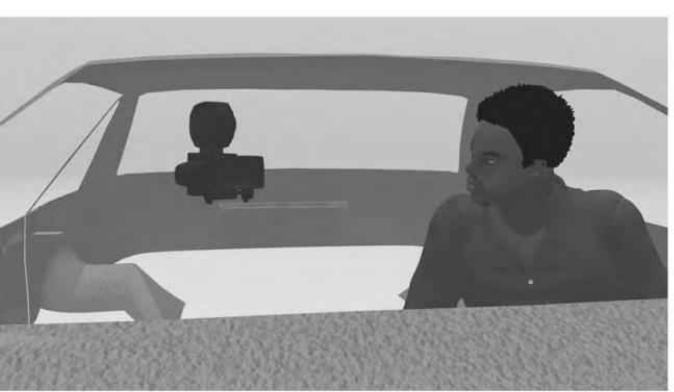
This shot complements the Front Seat shot from the previous chapter, and can be used in the same sequence. In essence, you sit the camera operator on the back seat, and shoot the driver or front seat passenger.

As can be seen from this example, the trick is to get the driver's face in shot. When you're shooting the passenger, it's not so much of a challenge, because the passenger can legitimately turn around to look into the back seat. The driver, however, needs to watch the road. This is especially true if your actor is actually driving the car.

The solution is to have the driver only glance around, and look in the mirror. Use a longer lens for the mirror shot, as you want the eyes to be clearly visible. Focusing on a mirror image can be tricky, so double-check the focus.

This set-up works well when the main character is in the back seat, and the character in the front seat is of less importance. If the front seat character was more important, you'd probably put the camera in the passenger seat and film him from there. This set-up helps to create the feel of a conversation in a taxi. It can make the passenger feel a little isolated and unsettled, as the communication is all through glances, reflections and slight turns of the head.







9.3

CAR DIALOGUE

You can achieve excellent in-car dialogue, without having to use car-mounts or complex rigs, by shooting from the back seat.

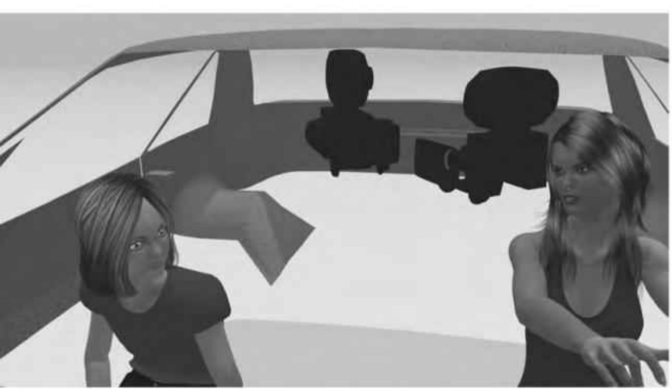
As you can see from this example, the actors need to look across at each other, for their expressions to be clearly in frame. This will mean that the non-driver gets far more coverage than the driver, because the driver will have to spend most of her time watching the road.

As always, slow driving will give an impression of reasonable speed, so don't rush. Give your actors plenty of motivation to look at each other; this shouldn't be a casual chat, but a conversation that forces them to make eye contact.

For each set-up, put the camera on the opposite side of the car to the actor. The actor who's driving should be framed hard on the left, and the actor on the right should be framed hard to the right.

Having the windows slightly open, as shown here, can disturb the sound, but does add a bit of energy to the scene, as it makes the actors' hair flutter in the breeze.







9.4

THE PARKED CAR

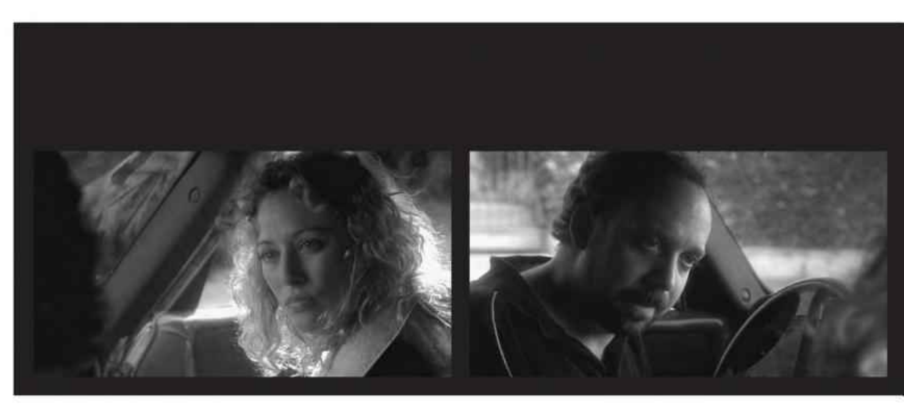
Many scenes take place in parked cars, and because the car's not moving you have a bit more flexibility in your shooting approach. Although you could simply put the camera in the backseat, as shown in the previous chapter, you don't have to do so.

By placing the camera outside the car, you can use a longer lens. This helps the audience to focus on the actors, and their dialogue, rather than on the surroundings.

Set up your cameras outside the car, as shown in the diagram. Your actors will need to lean forward, in most cases, depending on the construction of the particular car you're using. This forward lean makes the conversation seem important, so only use this technique when the conversation is truly engaging to the characters.

To avoid shooting through glass, open the door, or wind the window down. Every car is different, but by using a long lens, and opening windows and doors, you should be able to find an angle that gives you a good shot.

Ask your actors not to move too much, because foreground intrusions of car doors and chassis will detract. To the audience, it should feel as though we're in the car with the actors.







9.5

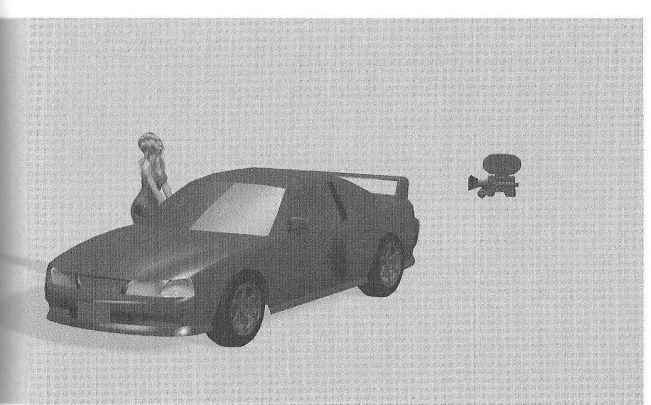
LEAVING THE CAR

Transitional shots, where somebody moves through a doorway, can be a moment of power and interest, or a moment of boredom. This is never more true than with car doors. If you're not careful, then getting into or out of a car is nothing more than passing time, and does nothing to keep the audience interested. If you need to see your character get out of the car, you need to make it interesting.

One way to do this is to identify with the actor closely, by staying on her level and moving in to a tighter framing as the scene progresses. When the shot begins, in this example, the camera is at head height. The framing is attractive enough to keep the viewer interested, and as she stands up, the camera rises with her. Some time during this transition, a cut is made to a medium close-up, with a longer lens. This draws us into the character's world, and helps us identify with her. It's a subtle difference, but it's far more interesting than just pointing the camera at somebody as they get out of the car.

You can set your camera up in one position, at head height, and simply follow the actor's movement, then repeat with a longer lens. It also helps if the actor is looking almost directly into camera, rather than away into the distance. Try to frame the shot so that whatever she's interested in is apparently behind the camera, so she has a motivation to put her eyeline so close to camera.







9.6

CAR WALK

In the real world, we rarely talk to people in a moving vehicle; it's easier for the car and the person to stop and talk. In film, however, this convention helps to sell the idea that there's a mild barrier between two people. It's used most frequently when one person is trying to coerce the other into their life. The effect can be sinister or sincere, depending on context.

As shown here, the framing is quite simple, with the exterior character framed hard to the right, and the interior character framed to the left. Camera height, though, is crucial in determining whose scene this is. In this example, the camera is at the driver's height for both directions, indicating that we identify with the driver more strongly. If the camera was at the walker's head height, there would be a very different feeling. Some directors choose to put the camera at different heights for each direction, but this can neutralize the scene.

Great care must be taken when shooting these scenes, and the car should barely even move at walking pace. When shooting the driver, set-up a dolly and track along with the car, slightly ahead of the driver, so that he can be framed to the left. When shooting the walker, set-up the camera in the front seat (close to the front windshield) so that the walking character is framed to the right.

A long lens helps to separate the characters from their surroundings, but you don't want to cut out the bodywork of the car completely, or the shot can feel a bit disorientating.









SHOOTING THROUGH WINDOWS

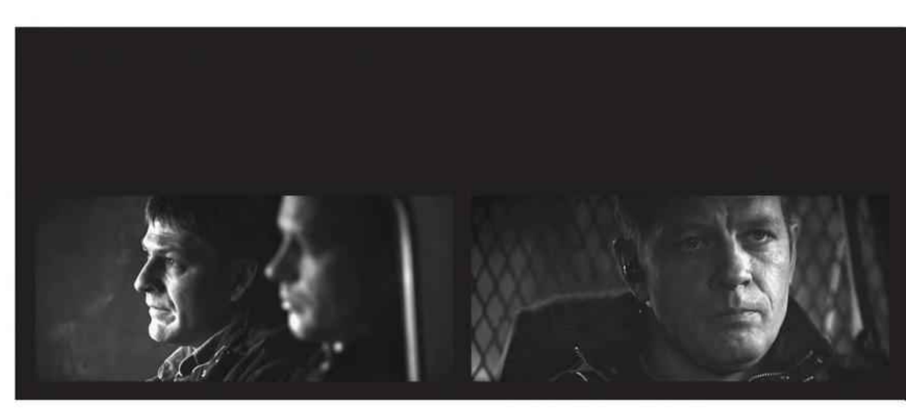
During a stake-out type scene, or where characters are sitting in a car waiting for something to happen, you need a unique set-up. You don't want to have the actors looking at each other, or to rack focus between them as they talk. Instead, you set-up a camera angle that focuses on each actor in turn.

In the first set-up the camera is located on the left side of the car, far enough away that a very long lens can be used. This makes the actors head's appear roughly the same size. This is vital because the farthest actor is meant to be the focus of the shot, and too short a lens will make his head appear relatively small.

The use of a long lens also means that by focusing on the farthest actor, the actor closest to the camera is out of focus. This directs our attention where it needs to be, while still allowing us to see that there are two people in the car. You may need to cheat slightly, and sit the farther actor slightly forward.

When you want to show the actor in the left-hand seat, you change to a completely different angle. Here, the camera is placed directly in front of the car, with a long lens framing this actor's face for a close-up.

There are many variations on this approach, with cameras at various angles and with different framings. The important point, however, is that whatever angle or framing you choose, only one character should be the focus of attention at any one time. This shot is about watching and waiting. If it's about a conversation, you'll use one of the other set-ups previously described.







CHAPTER 10

DIALOGUE SCENES



10.1

CONVERSATION DOLLY

All too often, dialogue scenes are framed with the characters looking directly at each other, and the editor cutting between the different angles. It works, but it can be tedious. An alternative, shown here, is to sit the characters next to each other. At the same time, you push in on the characters, from both angles.

One character should be quite dominant in the scene, as shown in this example. One character is looking directly at the other, who attempts to avoid her gaze.

Whether you're shooting with two cameras at once, or taking each angle in turn, it is essential that your dolly moves happen at exactly the same speed. You'll be cutting between two moving shots, and that only looks good if they move in at the same speed.

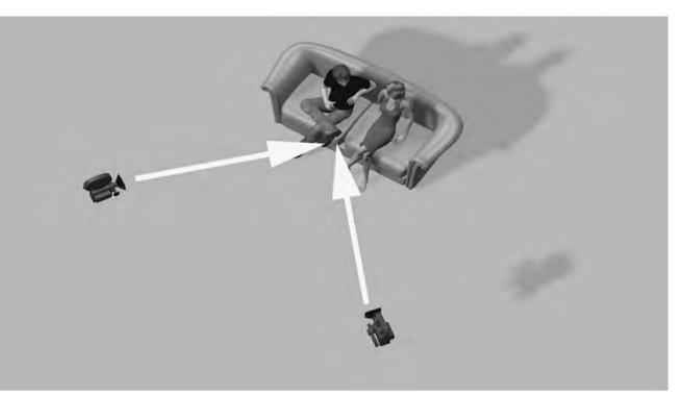
A fast push in will create way too much effect, so this works best when there is a relatively brief conversation, and the dolly draws us into the intimate power of this moment between two characters.

If your cameras come to rest before the end of the scene, you may find it more powerful to stick with one shot when you come to edit. Cutting between the two shots after the move is over can seem a little forced. On the other hand, cutting out of the scene while the cameras are still moving feels like we're leaving before the conversation is over. Ideally, the camera should come to rest just a couple of beats before you want the scene to end, so you can stay with one shot for a moment, and then cut.











10.2

OFFSET BACKGROUND

One way to make a dialogue scene interesting is to have one character refusing to look at the other, and using a camera move to focus in on this conflict.

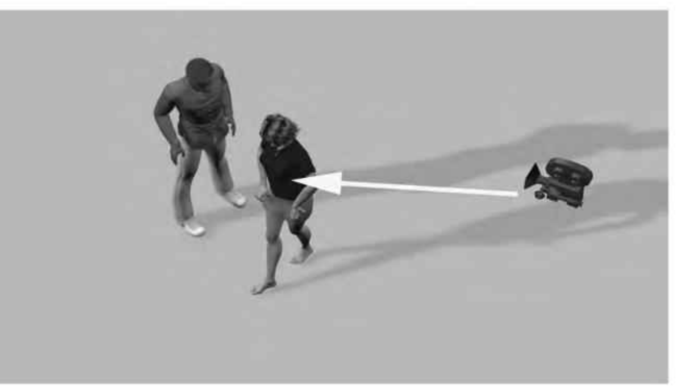
The effect works particularly well if there is a more detailed background to begin with, as shown here. In the initial framing, there are three people, and as the move finishes, there are just two. This means that as the conversation continues, we are drawn to the stubborn character, as the rest of the world fades away.

At the same time, however, the character who's facing him remains in frame, but because the camera is closer to both, the distant actor goes slightly out of focus. This again keeps our focus on the nearest character.

Set up your actors in an L-shaped pattern, and frame the shot behind the main character, as shown in this example. The background can be a corridor, a landscape, or as shown here, another person. Track the camera around, bringing it very close to the face of the nearest actor. As you do, you must pull focus onto him, throwing the background slightly out of focus.

Although you may be tempted to have this character move, the effect is strongest if he remains still. This allows us to pass him, which creates a stronger feeling of resistance in him, than if we are simply following his movements.







10.3

SHARE SCREEN

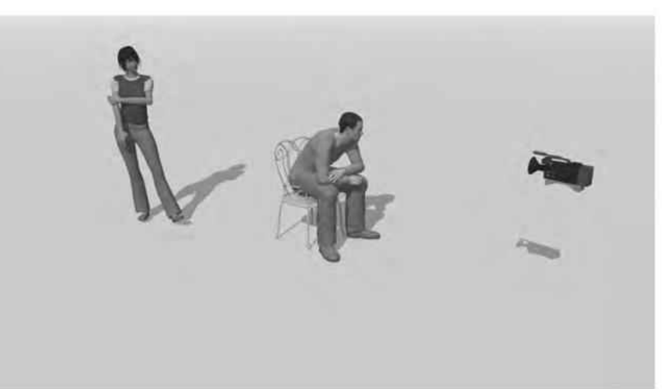
The classic way to show a conversation is to cut between shots of each actor, as they face each other. Although this is such an established standard that it nearly always works, it does lack cinematic interest. It also means the rhythm of the scene is dictated by the edit, rather than by the actors. If you want an actor-led scene that shows both characters at the same time, you can achieve a more naturalistic feel. In real conversations, people rarely stand facing each other, so when actors share the screen, the shots feel more realistic.

The danger is that you end up with the classic soap opera shot, where one character stands facing the camera, and the other talks to their back. The reason this is used so often in soap opera is that it's an efficient way to show both characters at once. It's such a cliché, though, and so unrealistic, that it can't be used effectively in films, without giving it a twist.

By orienting your actors carefully, you can allow both faces to be seen in the shot at the same time. It works best when the actors are seated, on different levels, or where one actor is moving around the other. It also helps to have the actors glance at each other throughout the scene.

Letting both actors share the screen is potentially less dramatic, because no actor is completely dominant in the shot. Whoever's looking more directly into camera will draw our attention. Without care, you can end up with both actors being shown in profile, which conceals their performances and lessens drama. To make the most of shared screen, position your camera so that one actor has a reasonably direct eyeline towards the camera, making them the dominant point of interest. These shots work with zero camera movement, but an ambitious director will move the camera and the actors. You can even switch which actor has the dominant eyeline halfway through the shot.







10.4

SIDE BY SIDE

You can stage a dialogue scene with the characters standing side by side, but the danger is that they may seem disinterested in each other. If you want them to be engaged with each other's conversation without actually looking at each other, they should be looking at something off-screen that is compelling to both of them.

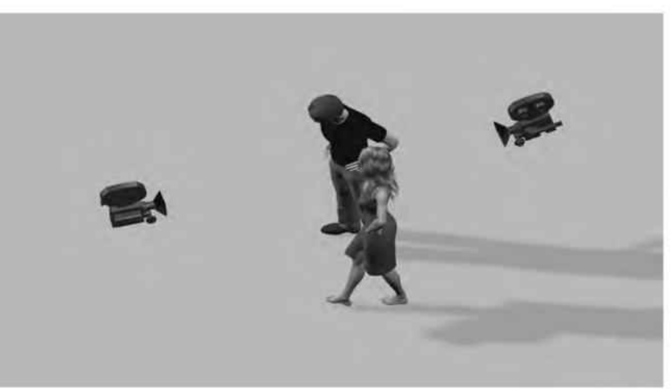
In this shot, the characters are both looking past (almost directly into) camera, as they watch television. What they're watching is a key part of the plot, so it makes sense for them to be arranged in this way.

Although you can have your actors glance at each other, it's more powerful if they don't; keep them looking ahead so that the audience gets to see their full reaction. This also means that their only connection is their dialogue, which brings more focus onto what's being said.

Unless you are deliberately teasing the audience, by refusing to show what's off-screen, you will need to cut to a reverse angle, to show what they are seeing. When you do so, it helps if you go behind them, so that they are then included with the subject of their gaze. To simply cut to the subject that they are looking at has the potential to disorient the audience. Also, by placing them in the shot, you maintain the strong connection between them that has been built by this set-up.

You may also find it helpful if this second shot is at a slightly different height than the first shot. If your actors are looking ever so slightly down, then place the reverse angle camera high up. This helps the audience to see what they are seeing, which helps us identify with them better than if you simply cut to a shot from the side.







10.5

HEIGHT CHANGES

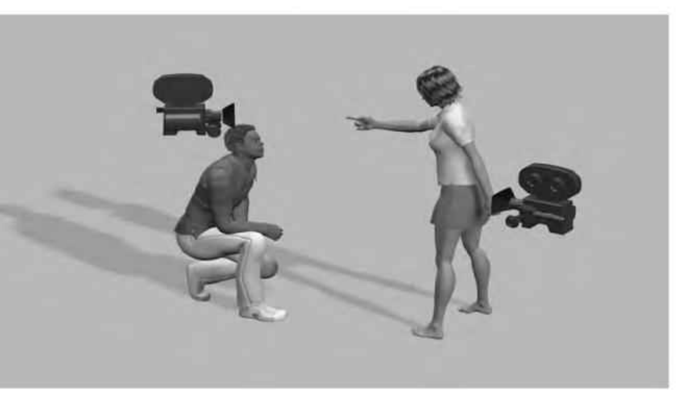
Good directors are always looking for interesting ways to stage dialogue, because anything is better than having the actors stand across from each other. A common solution is to put them at different heights. As always, this has to be justified by the story and the relationships they are exhibiting.

In this set-up, both cameras are at the head height of the actor they are filming. This means that both cameras are horizontal. Often when people shoot actors at different heights, they tilt the camera down at the kneeling actor, and tilt up at the standing actor. This set-up, where there is no tilt, is more unusual, but also more intimate. The camera is taking a cold hard look at each character as they respond to the other. It is a very bold and direct technique, but if the scene is strong enough, it makes the dialogue powerful.

One way to shoot this would be to fill the frame with a single actor, with no part of the other actor showing. The problem with this is that, because we are not using the tilt-up/tilt-down technique, the eyelines are far from normal and the audience can become disoriented. It helps, therefore, if you set-up the lower camera so that it includes both the actors. In this example, only Brittany Murphy's arm is showing, and that is enough for us to see how the actors are positioned. In the reverse shot of her, there is no need for any part of Michael Douglas to be visible, because the audience is already well oriented.

Cutting between different focal lengths rarely works with dialogue, but when you're shooting at different heights you can get away with it. The more intense character can have a shorter lens, to look slightly distorted and to exaggerate her movements.







10.6

STAGED GLANCES

When people sit next to each other, you can use their glances at each other to emphasize a developing relationship or to show nervousness. This is much more compelling to watch than having both characters stare at each other directly. It works particularly well when the couple are still getting to know each other, as shown in this example.

Your actors should be sitting on a shared piece of furniture, with one being more forward than the other, angling her body towards him. In this scene, this is her house and she's more confident and interested in him, so it makes sense for her to face him. If he was to face her as directly, it would be a very different scene. As it is, he faces forward, most of the time, and only turns his head to glance at her. When he does, it is a powerful moment and much more moving for the audience, than if he was looking at her the whole time.

The camera set-up is extremely simple, with a camera at head height for each actor, at roughly the same distance and angle. Both shots should be slightly over-shoulder, so that the two characters are connected at all times.

A set-up like this is very much based on the actors' performance. It must make sense for one character to angle her body, while the other must have a good reason to avoid eye contact. If this does make sense for the script, the set-up works extremely well and the restrictions often help the actors find a performance.







10.7

MIRROR TALK

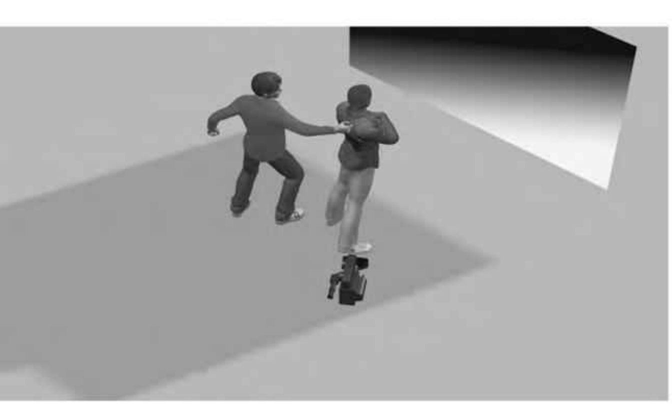
A good way to keep both actors' faces on screen while they talk is to have them look at each other in a mirror. It helps, however, if one is behind the other.

By placing one actor behind the other, it enables you to frame the more distant character in the center of the screen, thus giving him more impact. Even if his face is hidden in shadow, this centralization helps to make this character stand out more. This is important because, being further away from the camera, he will appear too small and insignificant if framed to the side.

When you place him in the center, however, you should ensure that the other character frames him on either side; reflected face on one side, and shoulder on the other. This framing is quite claustrophobic, so it's good for arguments or conflicts.

If framed well, the central character will almost appear to be looking directly into camera. This very tight eyeline helps us identify with him, and means he is the dominant character in the scene. The actors only need to look at each other, and you will achieve this eyeline effect, so long as your camera is as close to the actors as possible.







10.8

MOVE WITH THE BEATS

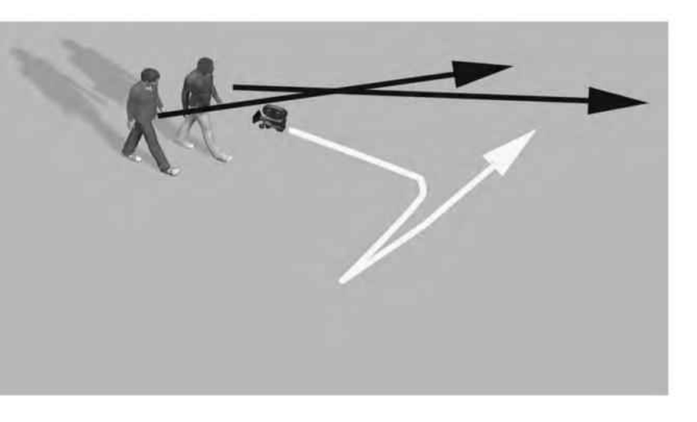
People often talk as they move, and so do characters. The problem for a director is how to make the camera move interesting, rather than just tracking along with the characters as they move. One creative solution is to have the camera move according to the changes in intensity that occur in the story.

In the example shown here, the camera begins by dollying back as the characters walk down the corridor talking. This is a classic backwards-dolly two-shot. But then as the characters move into the room, the camera turns and backs away from them. This is at the moment that their discussion turns to a more conflicted one. They turn to face each other and the camera makes space for the argument.

Then, after a slight pause, the camera begins to dolly back toward them as the intensity of the conversation moves up another step. This is much more interesting than if the camera had simply stayed with them, or dropped into a medium close-up of them talking.

Seeing characters from the side on is never as intense, or as revealing of character, so you should use this shot when you are trying to communicate the relationship between two characters, or the subject mater they are talking about. If you want to reveal an important plot point as the characters talk, this is an ideal technique because you don't want to be staring into an actor's smoldering eyes when you're meant to be listening to important information.







CHAPTER 11

ARGUMENTS & CONFLICT



11.1

CIRCLING

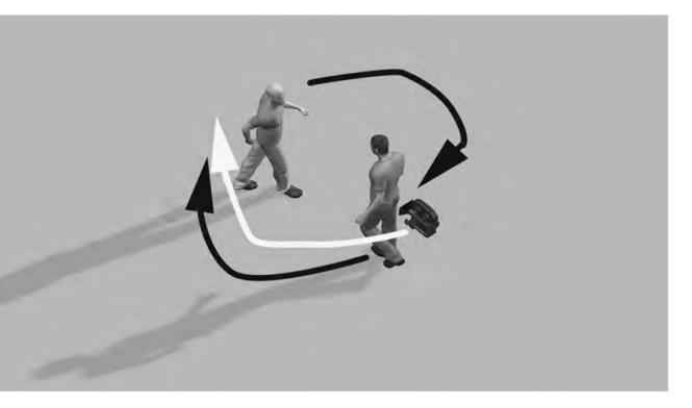
A strong way to show characters on the brink of an argument, but trying to hold the conflict in check, is to have them circle one another, almost like animals. This sounds like a relatively simple shot, but there are a few subtleties that help make it work well.

There should be a dominant character, who motivates the circling. Here, Hayden Christensen is the one who begins to walk around Ian McDiarmid. This means that Hayden's body is side-on throughout the shot, whereas Ian's is facing directly towards camera. This makes Hayden looks like he's prowling, whereas Ian is defensive. This is essential for setting up the power struggle between the characters.

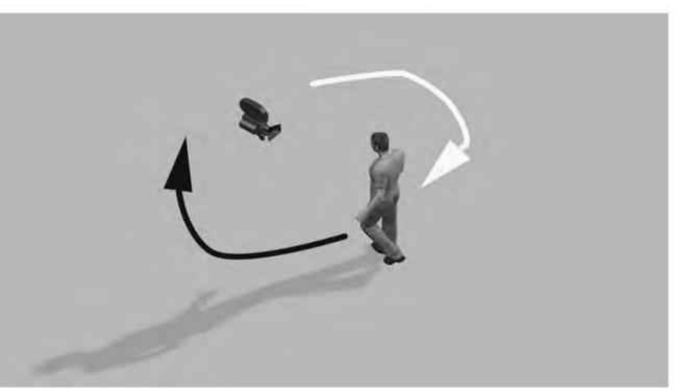
Also, when one character begins circling, there is the temptation for the second character to just turn in a circle on the spot, but this tends to look ridiculous when edited into the final sequence. Instead, the second character should also turn in a circle, but this should be more of a side-stepping shuffle, so that he continues to face the main character directly.

You can cover this in many ways, with stationary cameras and circling cameras, but one of the best ways is to shoot two simple versions. In the first, the camera takes the place of the dominant character, and films the second character face on, almost as a Point of View shot.

For the second set-up, you should be behind the second character, in and over-the-shoulder set-up. Cutting between these two set-ups is far stronger than cutting between two over-the-shoulders or two POVs. In both cases, let the actors dictate the speed of the movement, and have the camera follow.









11.2

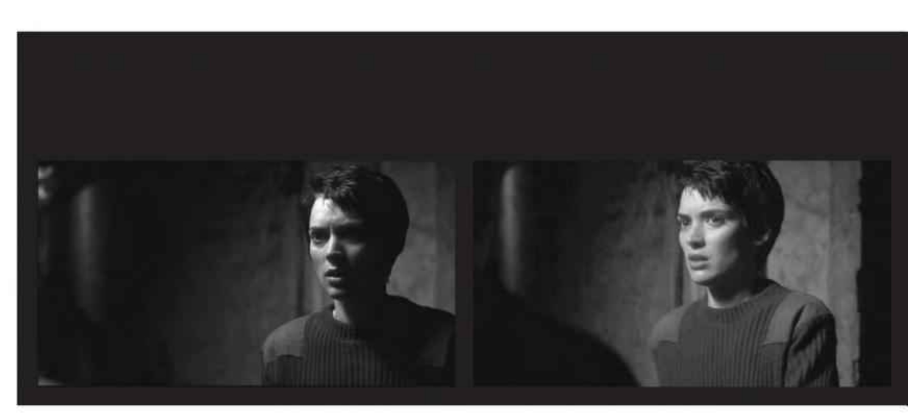
ATTACKING CAMERA

In some arguments, both characters exhibit an equal level of intensity, but in most filmed arguments, there is one dominant character, pushing the argument along. This can switch mid-scene, at times, but it always helps to know who's the more dominant character. This enables you to use the camera to lunge at the more submissive character.

In the example shown here, Winona Ryder only backs off a short distance, but the camera moves towards her faster than she's getting away. This makes it feel as though we are attacking her. It helps that the shoulder or hair of the second character occasionally brushes into the left-hand side of the frame. This is not an over-the-shoulder shot as such, but those glimpses of the other character help add to the sensation generated by the camera.

It helps if you frame the character hard to one side of the frame, as this constantly makes us feel that the attacking character is actually going to lunge into the empty frame.

Although you may be tempted to lunge the camera in jerking movements, you can create a more impressive look if the camera moves in steadily, even though the actor moves back in uncertain, jerking motions. As always, on-set experimentation at the last minute will help you decide.







11.3

DEFENSIVE CAMERA

Sometimes the smallest of camera moves have the greatest effect. If you want to show that a character is getting the upper hand in an argument (in terms of emotional intensity) you can move the camera backwards a little. It sounds absurdly simple, but there are a few more steps to make this work well.

You should set-up your camera in front of the second character, and then back off slowly into a slight over-the-shoulder shot. The move should not be too sudden, but a gentle move away from the main character.

If the main character moves towards the camera at the same time, some of the power of this effect is lost. A good solution, as demonstrated by Spielberg in this example, is to have the main character moves backwards and forwards as she argues. This is realistic: people in arguments do move forwards, back off, and then move forward again.

By blocking the actor in this way, and moving the camera back, you create the effect of a defensive feeling in the second character, rather than making the first character feel aggressive. Her movements are dictated by her emotions, and the camera's movement reflects the defensiveness of the second character.







11.4

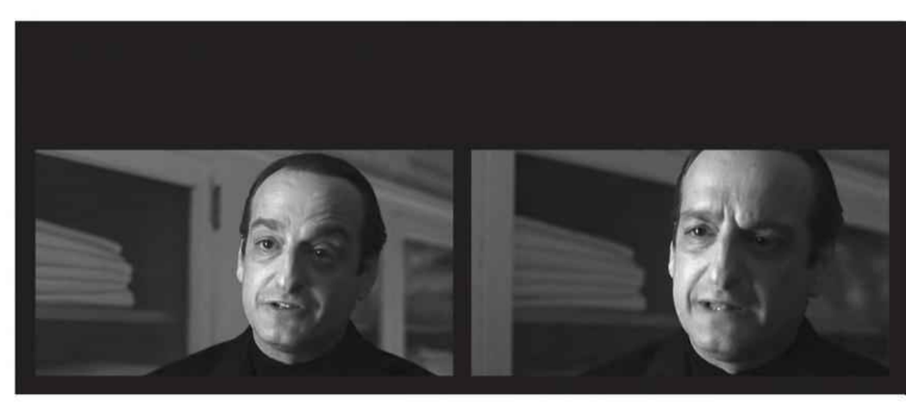
LUNGING AT CAMERA

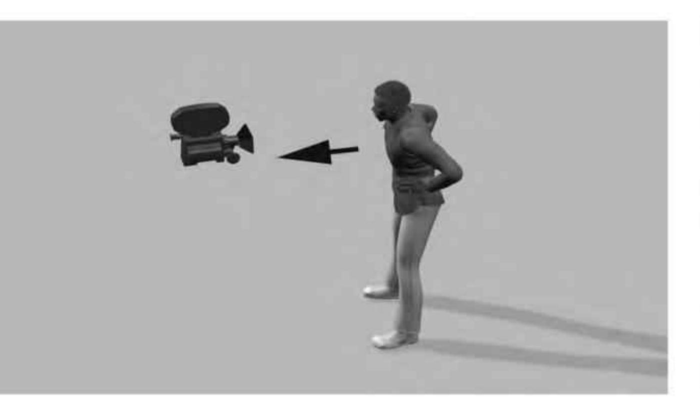
One of the best ways to show powerful aggression in an argument is to keep the camera exactly where it is, and have the actor move towards it suddenly. As can be seen in this example, the actor should be tightly framed to begin with, so that any forward movement feels like an intrusion.

When you want to exaggerate movement, you often use a short lens; this would have the effect of making a short forward movement seem larger. In this example, however, that doesn't quite work, as it creates too comical an effect. Instead, use a long lens, and frame the face tightly. When the actor moves forward, the framing will not change too abruptly because of the lens choice.

For the lunge forward to show up at all, however, your actor will have to move forward at least a foot. It may feel unrealistic to the actor, so you will need to reassure them how this is going to look on camera. Some actors find this kind of exaggerated lunge actually helps with their acting, because they are being given permission to go to the extreme for just a moment.

You can make the camera flinch, slightly, at the moment of the lunge, or cut to the second character, and show his reaction.







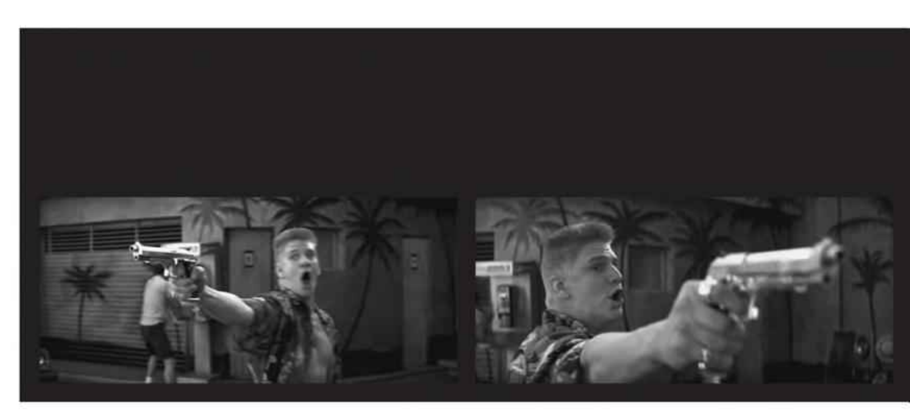
11.5

MOTION IN ANGER

Two common techniques used to emphasize drama can be combined to make a moment of high impact in an extreme argument. The whip pan and the push-in, when combined, create an unusual but potent effect. In the example here, the camera pushes forward, but as the gun swings to the right, the camera whips to follow it, reframing the character on the left. The two moves create a real sense of panic.

This works best when your actor is carrying a gun, waving his fists, or has something else to move across the screen. He should be pointing, or moving something, from one side of the screen to the other, so that as you push in, you have a motivation to whip to the other side.

The most important thing to get right is the timing. You don't want to be following the actor's movement, but you should be moving at the exact same speed. This will require rehearsal, and a good operator who should be worrying about nothing else other than the whip pan. Let everybody else handle the focus, dolly move and other aspects of the shot.







11.6

BODY CONFLICT

Arguments and conflicts are often at their most interesting when the intensity and aggression dies away, and the final stages of weary diplomacy take over. This is particularly true when the argument is between a couple. Are they trying to make up, or are they continuing to argue?

In this set-up, most of the acting is done with the actors' bodies, so rather than using a complex move, set-up the camera so that you can see their bodies, and the way they relate to each other. Have them both facing the camera, lying down. This has the effect of one character ignoring or shunning the other, while the other is trying to get attention and be heard.

Resist the temptation to move the camera at all. Keep it on their level, and don't pan to account for their movement. You will need to instruct the actors to stay in roughly the same place, to assist this. Their movements should be subtle, with the sense of resistance leading to a great stillness. This will help the audience to focus on the emotion and meaning of their words.







11.7

BACK OVER SHOULDER

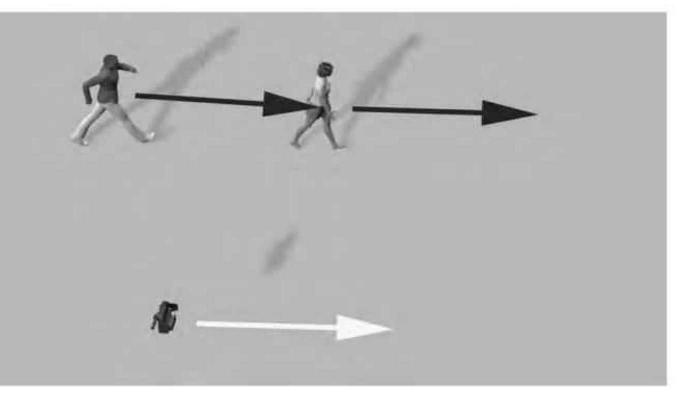
Arguments work well when your characters are on the move. Rather than having both move along together, it can help is one is fleeing the argument – not out of fear, but because she believes she has won and there's nothing more to say. Of course, in this scenario they do keep talking, even though she's acting as though the argument is over.

In this example from *Stealing Beauty*, the two characters rush along, and the camera tracks with them. Their distance from each other does not change, and the camera does not get any closer. This means the focus is on them and their relationship. To enable them to have a conversation, however, the leading actor has to look back over her shoulder. It is essential that she does this by turning in the direction of the camera and crew, so that the audience gets to see her face.

If she doesn't turn around, but speaks as she heads away, this can still be realistic, but is a more profound argument. When the character looks back over her shoulder, she's still in the argument, even though she's pretending to leave it.

You'll want to use quite a long lens, which means that however you choose to track the camera you'll need to keep it as stable as possible, to avoid the camera shake that can be induced by using a long lens.







11.8

CRISS-CROSSING

You can create a dynamic argument with almost no camera movement, by setting up the camera with a short lens, and letting the emotion come from the actors' movement.

In this example from *Hour of the Wolf*, Max von Sydow is so intent on avoiding the argument (at least at face value) that he walks away from Liv Ullmann. This brings him towards camera, so we see his bad-tempered face. Although she is close behind, the short lens makes her seem distant, but closing fast.

They then turn to face each other, but again he takes off, side-stepping to the right of her, but heading to the left of the screen. This pattern continues, with the characters crossing each other's paths. The diagrams make this clear, with the black lines indicating how they cross paths repeatedly. If they only moved backwards and forwards, this scene would feel forced and unreal, but because they are half-circling, and going first one way and then the other, it has a great deal of realism.

Although you should give your actors some freedom, it is important that they cross each other's paths, otherwise it just feels like one character is trailing after the other. Include several changes of direction, and the scene will work. You can even pause during this scene, for face-to-face conversation, and achieve the entire scene without a cut.






CHAPTER 12

LOVE & SEX SCENES



12.1

EYE CONTACT

When the chemistry is right, a powerful look between characters that are falling in love is one of the most enduring images in cinema. Actors and directors pray for these moments. Love should be written all over their faces, so that we can see it clearly even though the characters aren't acknowledging it out loud.

There is a technique, using extremely simple camera set-up, which helps to get this moment right. You will still need to do all the creative work getting the actors to perform, but this set-up and approach will make sure it's captured in a way that makes it work on screen.

For this moment to work, you need to create some visual tension. You do this by having the characters avoid looking at each other for most of the scene, even if they are talking and standing close to one another.

Then, when they do look at each other, they take turns. In this example from *A Heart in Winter*, Daniel Autiel looks at Emmanuelle Béart only when she looks at the violin. And she only looks at him when he's looking away from her. They're so studiously avoiding eye contact, that the audience can't wait for them to look at each other. This goes on for half the scene, and then they look at each other. The moment is complete. If the director had simply had them looking at each other throughout, the moment where they felt love might not have been clear to the audience.

Your actors can be arranged in many ways, but the arrangement here works well. They are ostensibly facing each other, but they keep turning their heads, and most importantly, their eyes, away. The camera should be at the height of the character being observed. Don't give each character their own frame – the other character should always be present at the edge of frame. This ensures that we pick up on the moment when they finally look at each other.







12.2

FIRST CONTACT

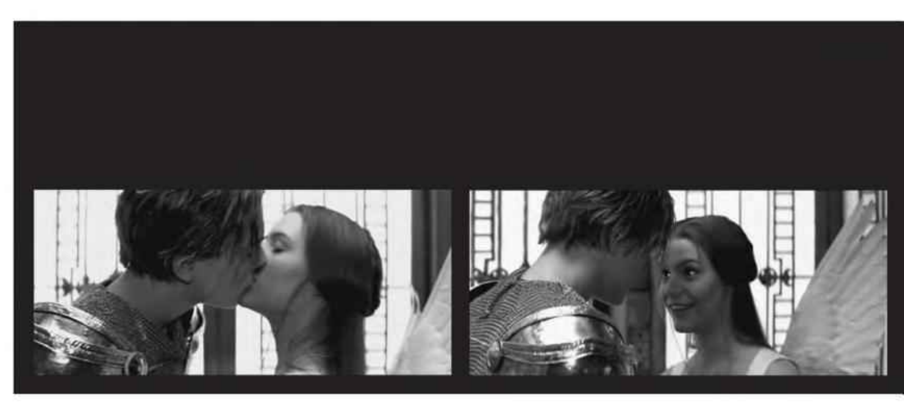
An audience is always waiting for the first on-screen kiss, but it remains one of the most difficult scenes to shoot with any elegance. Kissing is, after all, something that hides the face, and what we can see of the face is often bent and crushed against the other person's face. It takes careful framing and precise body-acting to get this to work.

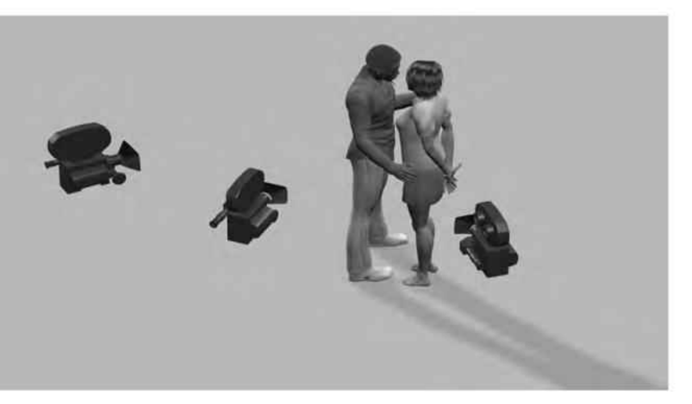
Ideally, you want to be able to see the actors' faces immediately before and after the kiss. It's their expectation and reaction that counts. A standard over-the-shoulder shot will not work, because the actors are too physically close, so you need to move the camera further around. This has the effect of including one actor's face, while the actor with his back to us is also clearly in the shot. This is much more satisfying than an over-the-shoulder shot, given that we are trying to achieve a sense of romance.

When the kiss itself happens, however, these angles are not generally satisfactory, as too much face is hidden. It's better to have a camera perpendicular to the actors.

When the actors kiss, one of their noses will get hidden behind the other – this is unavoidable. You don't want one actor to completely shield the other actor, so the least tall actor (usually the woman) should tilt her head back more than would feel normal for a real-world kiss. This slight angling back helps to keep more of her face in shot. It's a highly technical thing to request of an actor who's trying to achieve a convincing kiss, and not all actors will be happy to comply, but it is worth trying to keep as much of her face in shot as possible.

The moment the kiss is over, cut back to one of the other angles, so we can see their reactions.







12.3

KISS ANGLES

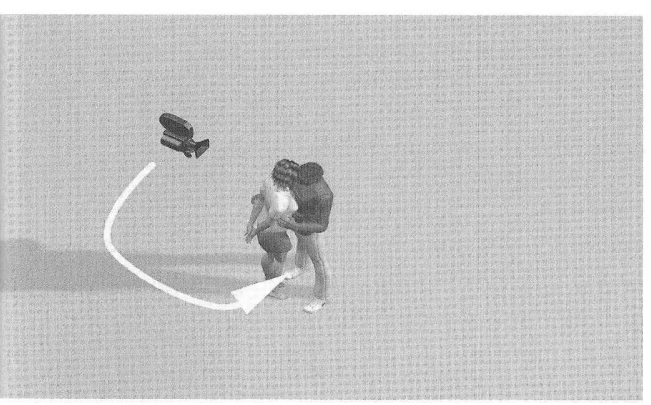
In the previous section, First Contact, we showed how three angles could be used to show the main elements of the kiss. Instead of shooting from three angles, you can swing the camera round the actors, to cover the same angles.

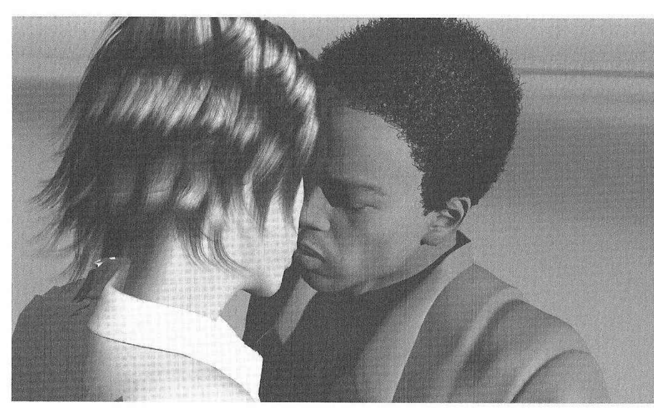
As you can see from this example, this works best if the camera is slightly above the actors, looking down at them. This approach also makes it possible for one character to dominate the scene, rather than having it be a shared moment. Here, Liv Tyler's character is the subject of the scene, so the camera passes behind the male actor. It's her face that we see most clearly at all points through the kiss.

Most people, when they kiss, lean to the right. In film, however, we need a little more variety, and in a shot like this, it helps if the actor who is facing camera changes the angles of her head as the camera moves. At the beginning of the shot she is leaning towards the camera, and by the time the camera has swung around behind the other actor, her head has angled towards the camera again. This isn't always essential, but is important if you want the scene to be more about her than about them as a couple.

You can also see how she has angled her body away from the other actor. This may be because it makes for a more beautiful framing, or because of the character's reluctance to kiss, but it is the sort of detail you need to be aware of. Most kissing scenes are shot poorly, and it's worth trying to be better than average, because a good kissing scene is enough to make some people go back to see a film again (or buy the DVD).







12.4

GETTING DOWN

If your kissing scene is to progress to a more sexual one, then at some point you need to get the characters to lie down. This can be quite awkward to film, but there are a few elegant solutions. One of the more beautiful solutions is to cut from the kiss to a shot of an empty bed, and then have the characters fall back into the shot.

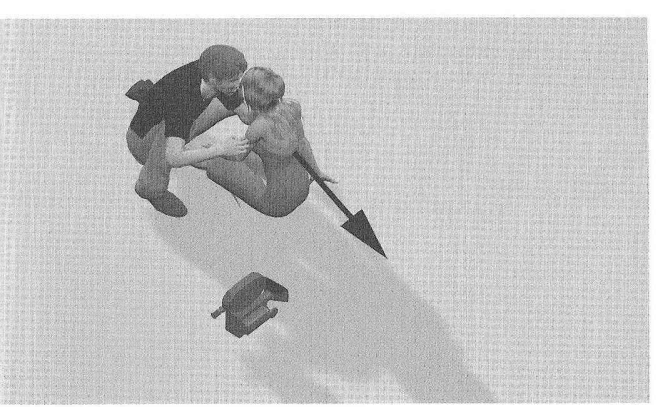
One of the beauties of this technique is that it eliminates a potentially awkward moment where the actors stop kissing and begin to move toward the bed; if you want this to feel like a flowing sex scene, rather than an awkward one, the cut to empty space can solve your problem.

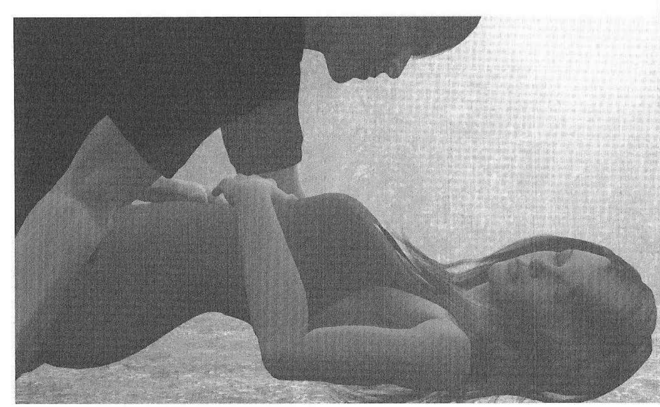
At this point you may want your characters to talk more, to kiss more or to undress each other, and this set-up has the advantage of being suitable for all three.

There are a few pitfalls to avoid. Be careful not to have the lower character go down too fast, or there can be a trampoline effect which looks comical. It's also best if they come into shot almost as one; if one falls back, and then the other falls in later, the result can again be comical. It should look as though they have simply flowed out of a kiss and into this position.

This works best when the characters are not actually in an embrace, so you can put a little space between them, before the intimacy is resumed.







12.5

OUT OF BODY

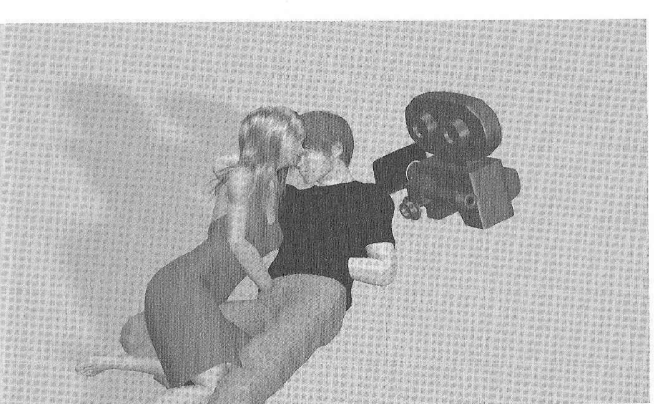
Some of the finest sex scenes ever shot show almost nothing of the bodies, but concentrate on the actors' faces. You can even shoot such scenes where the actors are almost completely clothed (so long as this makes sense story-wise).

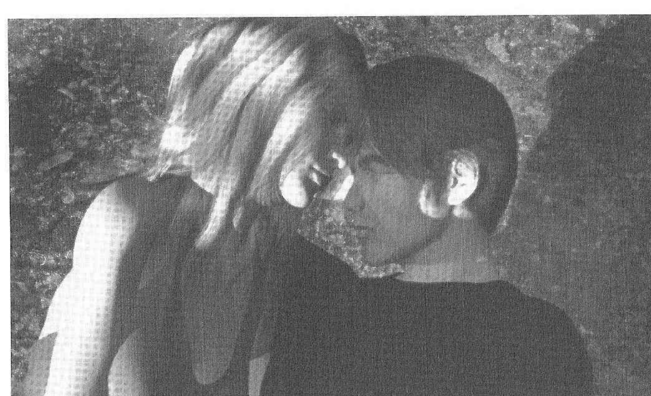
For this to work you require exceptional actors, but you may find that any actor will enjoy the challenge of a sex scene that is largely about the work they do with their faces and their feelings, rather than how much skin we get to see.

Set up your cameras so that both actors' faces are in shot. As you can see from these examples, the actors should not be facing each other directly, but have their faces close. There are many ways to achieve this, and a thousand variations, but essentially you are trying to get both faces in shot as much as possible, while making it plausible that they are exploring each other's bodies (and eventually making love).

The camera can either be at their head height, or slightly above, and it's best to begin this with a fairly tight framing. You can move further out as the scene progresses, to reveal more of their movement, and more of their bodies if required, but keep their faces angled toward the camera, so that the focus remains on their expressions. It's how they see each other, rather than what we see of them, that matters most.







12.6

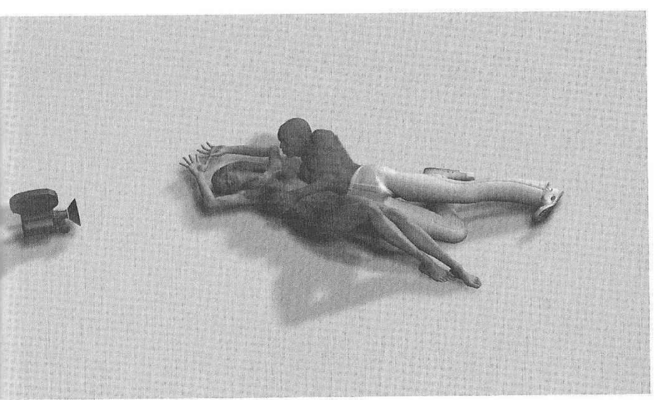
FACING UP

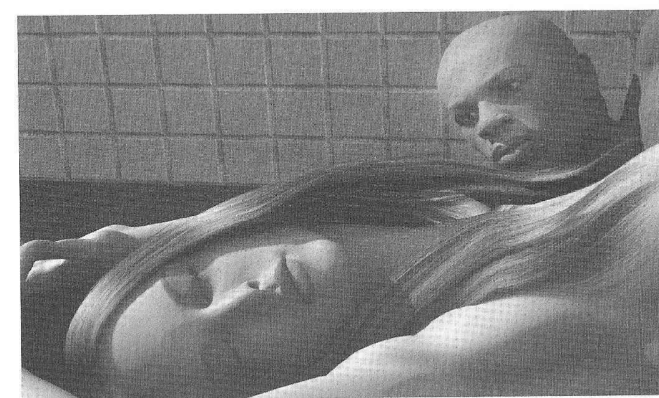
One of the great challenges with intimate scenes, as has been expressed many times, is trying to keep both actors' faces in view at once. In this example, the effect is achieved by careful positioning of the actors within the frame.

The woman is lying back, and although she is in conversation with the man (as they engage in foreplay), her head is thrown back to some extent. She's turned it more towards the camera than towards him. He continues to simulate making eye contact with her, even though he probably can't see her eyes.

The man is also lying off to one side of her slightly, because if he was laying directly on top her of, her body would be obscured and his head would be at the wrong angle. Although this shot looks easy and comfortable, it is actually quite precisely staged and may be quite difficult for the actors. It does, however, enable you to achieve a beautiful framing, without being a gratuitous body-shot. It works best for scenes where the characters are still talking, rather than just having sex.







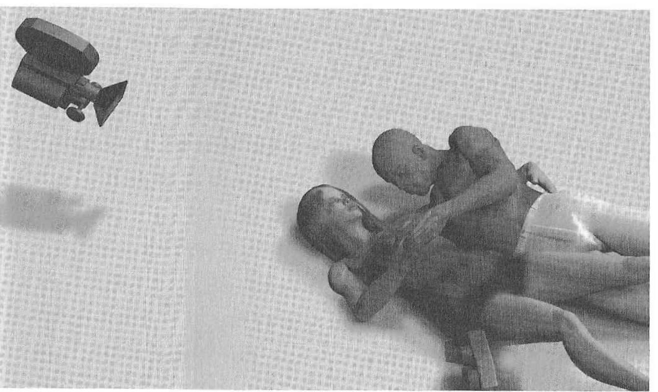
12.7

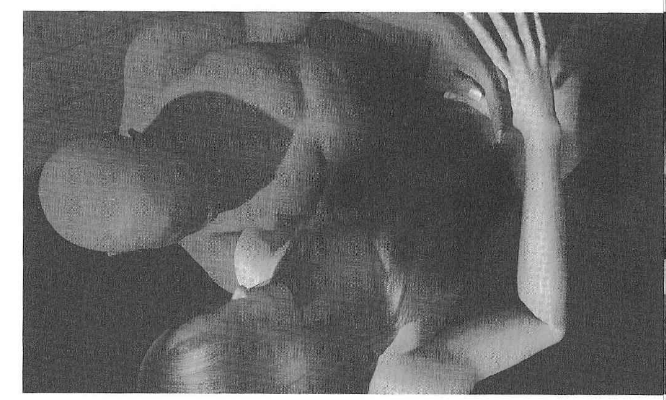
MOMENTS OF CONNECTION

When the talking is over, and the scene is more about body contact and eroticism, it takes skill to reveal the right details without looking forced. In this example the camera captures just a glimpse of Ziyi Zhang's face, as she throws her head back. Then we see her ribs, and the man's hands on her body.

This type of set-up is highly erotic as it takes the focus away from the faces and directly to the body. It is also worth noting that this is probably far more erotic than if she was naked, because of the expectation it brings; expectation and suggestion are more erotic than pure observation of a naked body.

The follow-up shot moves to an unusual angle, looking back down at the two of them, so that her face is upside down in the frame. In fact, her face takes up only a small part of the frame, and the mingled bodies fill the rest. Because the two of them appear to be upside down, this captures the dizzying sensation of an electrifying sexual encounter.



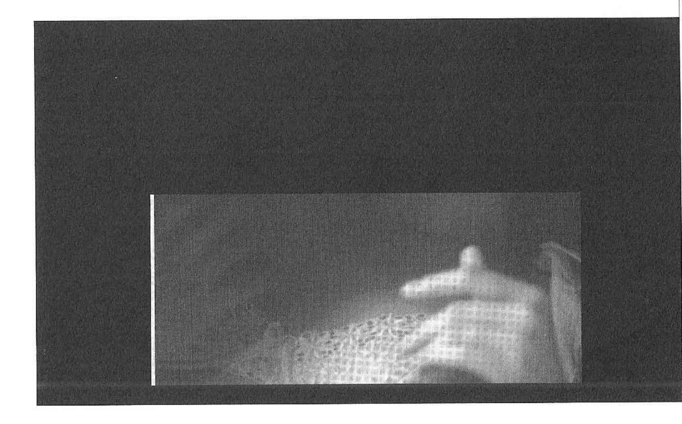


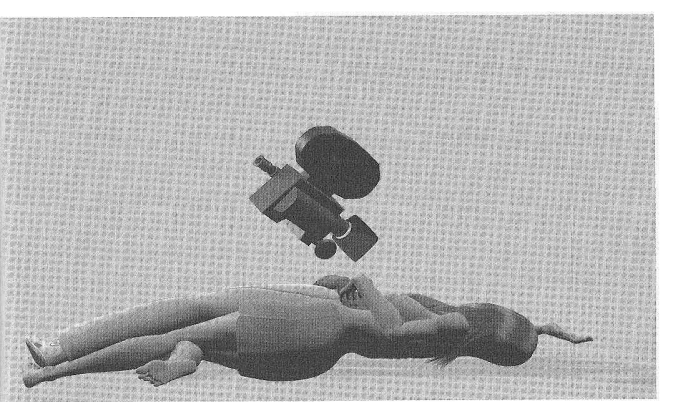
12.8

A WORLD OF DETAILS

When directors shoot sex scenes they often want to achieve a sense of great eroticism, but without a hint of pornography. One way to achieve this is to attempt to capture the sensation of actually having sex; rather than observing two people, why not put the camera right in there with them so we feel we're part of the experience. That way we feel the movement and scuffle of clothes and bodies, and catch glimpses of the tiny details of clothing and flesh, just as we do in the real world.

This one brief shot, from *Stealing Beauty*, shows nothing more than a blurred hand, shadow and a hint of bra. A long lens has been used, to throw everything out of focus but the bra. This brief moment is one of many glimpses that make us feel the proximity of this sex scene. Although we also cut back to see the two lovers kissing and touching each other, it is these glimpsed moments that draw us into their experience and make it one of the most sexually charged scenes on film.







CONCLUSION

When you direct a film, you have a lot on your mind. The hours are long, sleep is short and the pressure is high. And yet, in the midst of the circus, you are required to be as creative as you have ever been. As well as getting a strong performance from your actors, you need to shoot in a distinctive way that reflects your story. This is no easy task.

Writing this book helped me realize that the more intimately I knew technique, the easier it was to create under pressure. Time is always running out on a film set. After months or years of thinking about a film, you often have just moments to make a new choice or solve a problem. And then you live with that decision forever. To people who've never worked in film, it seems implausible that we can spend 12 hours getting two minutes of usable footage. For those who work in the industry, it seems like a miracle if we get that much. I hope this book will help you develop a way of seeing shots, and thinking up your own, that will make you able to work creatively when time is running out.

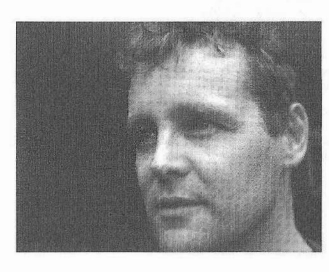
The better you know your craft, the easier it is to create. I've often heard filmmakers say they don't care about technique, or the history of film, and they just like to "be creative." Sometimes that works. But usually, you see filmmakers on set just "getting the coverage" because there was a technical problem and they couldn't think of a new solution in time. If they had a bit more knowledge about technique, they could probably have created something better.

This lack of vision is often hidden behind shaky camera work and fast edits. But if you want to deliberately create a film to communicate a story, you need more control than that. This doesn't mean you have to plan every shot in advance, but when technique becomes second nature, it's easier to be original. Think of Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*, telling Luke to unlearn what he has learned. When you know something well enough to "unlearn" it, you are on the path to greatness. Unfortunately, many people think the short cut is to avoid learning the technique in the first place. History shows they are wrong. The better educated you are about all aspects of filmmaking, the better you will be at making films.

Now that you know 100 Master Shots, you are better equipped than most filmmakers. Your task is to adapt them, improve on them, and build your own arsenal of workable shots.

I was inspired to write this book because I saw that there are filmmakers out there who refuse to be average, and who find new ways to create. For them, it's not about popcorn and grosses, but about making a great film. The challenge you face is to avoid being average. It takes a lot of time and effort to direct anything, but by the time you get on set, the pressure to get the job done without mistakes turns many a potential genius into a coward. I hope these techniques inspire you to be courageous in your filmmaking. Whatever the pressure, no matter how tired you are, choose greatness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Christopher Kenworthy has written, produced and directed several hours of drama and comedy, along with many hours of commercial video, TV pilots, music videos, experimental projects and short films.

His first feature film is *The Sculptor*, produced by Skyview Films in Australia in 2008. He's also produced and directed over 300 visual FX shots, and directed the web-based *Australian UFO Wave*, which attracted many millions of viewers. His short film, *Some Dreams Come True*, spent a year on the international festival circuit and won several awards.

As a screenwriter he's contributed to the development of several TV shows. He is the author of two novels and a handful of nonfiction books. He was born in the North of England, but has lived in Australia for over a decade.

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CHRISTOPHER KENWORTHY has written, produced and directed many hours of drama, comedy, commercial video, tv pilots, music videos, experimental projects, FX shots and short films. His feature film, *The Sculptor,* was completed in 2008.



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